

CHAPTER SIX

Queer Discourse in Indic Myths: 'Other' Stories from a Gender-fluid World

The popular culture in India has been woven into the fabric of its oral tradition, especially in the folklore of *The Mahabharata*, one of the earliest texts to have discourse in the queer space. The epic celebrates the liminality that was evident in the accounts of gender-queer people. Two of the greatest gods of Hindu religion were gender-fluid. Shiva, the 'Mahadeva', was a composite figure of 'Purusha' and 'Prakriti' - Ardhanarishwara - the God who was half-male and half-female (Courtright, *The Lord who is Half Woman* 1215). The epic recounts delightful tales of Vishnu as Mohini, the enchanting female principle that governed creation. *The Mahabharata* speaks of Yuvanshwa, the pregnant King, god Indra, who acted as the wet nurse of Mandhata, Ila/Ilaa who alternated between genders, and Shikhandini, the woman who became a man. We have Bhangashwan who was born a man but became a woman. Similar stories abound, some lauding the transition, others condemning it. From narratives of victimisation to the saga of assertion and representation, Queer India had a place for everyone.

Gender and sexuality in the Indic myths has long been a subject of academic research (Brodbeck and Black, 2007; Smith, 1985; Dumezil, 1988; Hildebeital, 1980). Asexual reproduction has been referred to several times over in *The Mahabharata (BORI)*. The

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celebrated Guru Dronacharya proudly proclaimed that he, the son of the great sage Bharadwaja, was born ‘ayonijam, i.e. he was not born of any woman: अंशाद्द्रोणं समुत्पन्नं भारद्वाजमयोनिजम् (*The Mahabharata BORI* 1:61)! The fabled Guru of the Pandavas was born out of a ‘water pot’: तस्मिन्समभवद्द्रोणः कलशे तस्य धीमतः॥१२॥ (ibid 1.120). Guru Kripacharya, took birth from a clump of reed: शरस्तम्बे च पतितं द्विधा तदभवन्नृप | तस्याथ मिथुनं जज्ञे गौतमस्य शरद्वतः ॥१३॥ (ibid 1.120). The commander-in chief of the army of the Devas, Kartikeyan, was born when Fire met Fire, i.e. from the union of Lord Shiva and God Agni:

अह्नः सुतः स्मृतो ज्योतिः श्रमः शान्तस्तथा मुनिः |

अग्नेः पुत्रः कुमारस्तु श्रीमाञ्शरवणालयः ॥२२॥ (ibid 1.60).

In yet another instance of gender-bending, *The Mahabharata* cites the example of King Yuvanashwa who drank the sacred water meant for his wife and gave birth to Mandhata, who in turn was wet-nursed by Lord Indra:

आपस्त्वया महाराज मत्तपोवीर्यसम्भृताः ॥

ताभ्यस्त्वमात्मना पुत्रमेवंवीर्यं जनिष्यसि ॥२३॥ (ibid 3:126).

Agastya, the great sage, was born of two Vedic Gods, Mitra and Varuna:

धाता मित्रोऽर्यमा शक्रो वरुणश्चांश एव च |

भगो विवस्वान्पूषा च सविता दशमस्तथा ॥१५॥ (ibid 1.59).

The narrative shows Arjuna taking up the role of Brihannala, the eunuch, who as a warrior saved the fortunes of the Matsya Empire:

कर्णयोः प्रतिमुच्याहं कुण्डले ज्वलनोपमे |

वेणीकृतशिरा राजन्नाम्ना चैव बृहन्नडा ||२२|| (ibid 4: 2).

The Mahabharata casts Vishnu as Mohini, the enchantress, who saved the Devas by killing Rahu and Ketu:

ततो नारायणो मायामास्थितो मोहिनीं प्रभुः |

स्त्रीरूपमद्भुतं कृत्वा दानवानभिसंश्रितः ||३९|| (ibid 1:16).

The Mahabharata reiterates the Upanishadic rendition of Shiva as the primal ‘Purusha’ who was one with Prakriti, lauding him as ‘Ardhanarishwara’.

It is intriguing that while *The Mahabharata* brings forth such role-models from amongst the gender-fluid characters, for example, Arjuna, the great warrior as the transgender Brihannala, or for that matter Yuvanashwa, the great king as the ‘mother’ of Mandhata, or Shiva as ‘Ardhanarishwara’ and Vishnu as ‘Mohini’, there are numerous references steeped in hatred, contempt and condescension. Bhima calls Yudhishtira a third gender and a eunuch for having resigned to the life of disgrace:

युक्तमेतत्तृतीयायां प्रकृतौ वर्तता त्वया |

वक्तुं धर्मादिपेतार्थं त्वं हि सर्वकुरुत्तमः ||२|| (*The Mahabharata BORI* 2.38.2).

Draupadi challenges her husbands to stop being eunuchs:

कथं ते सूतपुत्रेण वध्यमानां प्रियां सतीम् |

मर्षयन्ति यथा क्लीबा बलवन्तोऽमितौजसः ||२१|| (ibid 4.15.21).

Queen Vidula, the firebrand mother of prince Sanjaya, accuses her son of being a eunuch, as he had refused to fight at the warfront. She reproaches him because he does not take offence at his defeat. She alleges that a man devoid of anger essentially belongs to the third gender:

न मया त्वं न पित्रासि जातः क्वाभ्यागतो ह्यसि |

निर्मन्युरुपशाखीयः पुरुषः क्लीबसाधनः ||५|| (ibid 5.131.5).

She asks him as to why was he even alive, with his desires unfulfilled and his prestige gone:

इष्टापूर्तं हि ते क्लीब कीर्तिश्च सकला हता |

विच्छिन्नं भोगमूलं ते किंनिमित्तं हि जीवसि ||१७|| (ibid 5.131.17).

Duryodhana's frustration is obvious when he says that he would neither remain a man nor a woman if he lived to see the Pandavas flourishing, as a man who is devoid of anger is neither a man nor a woman:

एतावानेव पुरुषो यदमर्षी यदक्षमी |

क्षमावान्निर्मर्षश्च नैव स्त्री न पुनः पुमान् ||३०|| (ibid 5:131).

Similar assertions and accusations abound. The horrors that the epic reserves for mixing the Varnas also hold true for interchanging the roles of men and women:

न वर्णसङ्करकरो नाकृष्यकरकृज्जनः | न पापकृत्कश्चिदासीत्तस्मिन्नाजनि शासति ||

पुल्लिङ्गा इव नार्यस्तु स्त्रीलिङ्गाः पुरुषाभवन् | दुर्योधने तदा राजन्पतिते तनये तव ||५६||

The Mahabharata BORI 9:57

(Rivers of rapid currents flowed in opposite directions. Women seemed to look like men, and men to look like women at that hour, O king, when thy son Duryodhana fell! *The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 9: Shalya Parva: Section 58)

This chapter attempts to understand this dichotomy by focusing on epic characters who exist in Liminality and on the threshold of Celebration/Condemnation. The chapter is based on the Queer conceptual framework which seeks to destabilize the normative gender-based social order and opt for a more fluid, less structured social identity. While drawing upon the post-structural, post-modern ontologies and epistemologies, the Queer approach deals with ‘subjects and subjectivities which are fluid, unstable and perpetually becoming’ (Browne and Nash, 2016: 2).

Shikhandi who was Shikhandini

Of the innumerable cases of gender-bending the one that has captured the attention of researchers the most is the curious case of Shikhandi, the trans-sexual prince who was instrumental in the death of the Grandsire of the Pandavas, Bhishma Pitamaha. Assisting Arjuna in his unfortunate parricide of the Grandsire Bhishma was this Prince of Panchal, King Drupada’s lesser known son - a minor warrior called Shikhandi, whose very reason for existence was revenge.

The epic narrates the story of the birth of a ‘girl child’ in the Kingdom of Drupada, but contrary to the emergence of Draupadi which was marked by its share of pomp and pageantry, this birth was not celebrated. For Shikhandi was a transgender, and the stigma attached to such births forced Drupada and his wife to hide the reality. A trans-woman (assigned male at birth), Shikhandi was treated as a male, though hushed voices whispered of unsaid realities. The charade came to an end when Shikhandi was married off to the Princess of Dasharna who raised an alarm when she found out that her husband was a woman:

हिरण्यवर्मणः कन्या ज्ञात्वा तां तु शिखण्डिनीम् |

धात्रीणां च सखीनां च ब्रीडमाना न्यवेदयत् ||१४||

कन्यां पञ्चालराजस्य सुतां तां वै शिखण्डिनीम् ||१४|| *The Mahabharata BORI 5:190*

Incensed, the King of Dasharna declared war to avenge the insult. Drupada, the mighty King of Panchal could have given war, but being morally wrong in getting his daughter married to the daughter of the King of Dasharna he was dejected beyond words. King Drupada's wife informed him of the falsehood, saying that she was scared of being treated as a 'barren woman' by co-wives:

अपुत्रया मया राजन्सपत्नीनां भयादिदम् |

कन्या शिखण्डिनी जाता पुरुषो वै निवेदितः ||२|| *The Mahabharata BORI 5:192.*

Seeing her parents in this condition Shikhandini contemplated suicide:

ततः सा चिन्तयामास मत्कृते दुःखितावुभौ |

इमाविति ततश्चक्रे मतिं प्राणविनाशने ||१८|| *The Mahabharata BORI 5:190*

The epic presents a poignant picture of she departing to the forest to die, but as fate would have it, she lived because of the largesse of a demigod, a 'Yaksha' called Sthunakarna, who agreed to loan her his manhood:

धनेश्वरस्यानुचरो वरदोऽस्मि नृपात्मजे |

अदेयमपि दास्यामि ब्रूहि यत्ते विवक्षितम् ||२५|| *The Mahabharata BORI 3.191*

(I am a follower of the Lord of treasures, I can, O princess, grant boons! I will grant thee even that which cannot be given! Tell me what thou hast to say'. *The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Uluka Dutagamana Parva: Section CXCV))

The epic informs us that thus assured, Shikhandini shared her saga of grief and woe with the Yaksha Sthunakarna. She reminded the Yaksha that he had pledged to relieve her distress, and through his grace, she would become a perfect man. The Yaksha took pity on the princess, and assured her that he would exchange his gender with her for a while, but it was on loan, to be returned when the need was met:

स्त्रीलिङ्गं धारयिष्यामि त्वदीयं पार्थिवात्मजे |

सत्यं मे प्रतिजानीहि करिष्यामि प्रियं तव ||४||*The Mahabharata BORI 3.192*

Sikhandini requested the Yaksha to take her womanhood for a short time period and save her from the catastrophe. She promised that she would return his malehood as soon as the crisis was averted:

प्रतिदास्यामि भगवँल्लिङ्गं पुनरिदं तव |

किञ्चित्कालान्तरं स्त्रीत्वं धारयस्व निशाचर ||५||*The Mahabharata BORI 3.193*

The epic reports the charitable deed undertaken by the celestial:

The *Yaksha* said, 'O Blessed lady, for a certain period I will give thee my manhood. Thou must, however, come back to me in due time. Pledge thyself to do so! Possessed of immense power, I am a ranger of the skies, wandering at my pleasure, and capable of accomplishing whatever I intend. Through my grace, save the city and thy kinsmen wholly! I will bear thy womanhood, O princess! Pledge thy truth to me, I will do what is agreeable to thee!' Thus addressed, Sikhandini said unto him, 'O holy one of excellent vows, I will give thee back thy manhood! O wanderer of the night! bear thou my womanhood for a short time! (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Uluka Dutagamana Parva: Section CXCV)

Shikhandini came back to Drupada and informed him of the change of her gender. Drupada announced the same to the King of the Dasarnakas, but he was sceptical of the claim and wanted to verify the same:

ततः स राजा द्रुपदस्य श्रुत्वा; विमर्शयुक्तो युवतीर्वरिष्ठाः |

सम्प्रेषयामास सुचारुरूपाः; शिखण्डिनं स्त्री पुमान्वेति वेत्तुम् ||२५||

ताः प्रेषितास्तत्त्वभावं विदित्वा; प्रीत्या राज्ञे तच्छशंसुर्हि सर्वम् |

शिखण्डिनं पुरुषं कौरवेन्द्र; दशार्णराजाय महानुभावम् ||२६||

The Mahabharata BORI 5:193: 25, 26

(Having heard the words of Drupada, the King of the Dasarnakas despatched a number of young ladies of great beauty for ascertaining whether Sikhandin was a male or female. Those ladies, having ascertained (the truth) joyfully told the king of the Dasarnakas everything, viz., that Sikhandin, O chief of the Kurus, was a powerful person of the masculine sex. *The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Uluka Dutagamana Parva: Section CXCIV)

The war was averted, and Shiva's wish was fulfilled, as the Lord Himself had given the boon of a change of gender to Shikhandini (*The Mahabharata BORI 5:190*). The epic further informs us that Kubera, the King of the Yakshas, was incensed at the charity of his subordinate, the Yaksha, and cursed him to remain a woman for ever. This made the sex-change permanent, and the stage was now set for Shikhandi to take his much-awaited revenge from the grand sire Bhishma.

In his book titled '*Mitra-Varuna: an essay on two Indo-European representations*', Georges Dumezil compares the Gandharvas to the men-animals (Luperci) in Roman myths, whose task was to restore fertility. He refers to the restoration of virility to the first sovereign, Varuna and the plight of "Varuna's Greek counterpart, Uranos, at once an unbridled, excessive procreator and a tyrannical, intolerable sovereign, who lost his genitals and sovereignty simultaneously" (Dumezil 45). The Gandharvas are called "Varuna's people" by the Shatapatha Brahmana (XIV, 4, 3, 7). They live in dark quarters, where, according to one of the Vedic hymns, Indra smote the Gandharva for the greater good of the Brahmana. (Dumezil 72).

The epic informs us that Shikhandini, the beneficiary of the largesse of the Gandharva Sthunakarna, was Amba, the princess of Kashi, in her previous birth. In the typical way in which frame-tales work, the epic takes us back one generation to the Kingdom of Kashi where a 'Swayamvara' was being held for the three daughters of the King – Amba, Ambika and Ambalika (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Uluka

Dutagamana Parva). The word ‘Swayamvara’ literally means ‘choosing one’s own groom’, yet the three damsels did not get to do so, for they were captured by Bhishma, the grandsire of the Kauravas. Bhishma who had taken the vow of celibacy did not kidnap these girls for himself. The Princesses were meant to be the wives of his younger brother Vichitravirya (the one with the weird semen):

न स भीष्मो महाबाहुर्मामिच्छति विशां पते | भ्रातृहेतोः समारम्भो भीष्मस्येति श्रुतं मया
भगिन्यौ मम ये नीते अम्बिकाम्बालिके नृप | प्रादाद्विचित्रवीर्याय गाङ्गेयो हि यवीयसे ||१३||

The Mahabharata BORI 5:172

Of the three sisters, the younger two, Ambika and Ambalika, settled down with Vichitravirya, but the eldest called Amba, refused to come to terms with the abduction. She was in love with Salva, the King of Sauva and insisted on being sent back to him. Amba was given permission to do so but unfortunately King Salva developed cold feet and refused to keep his promise. He was afraid of Bhishma and did not want to have anything to do with Amba:

गच्छ गच्छेति तां शाल्वः पुनः पुनरभाषत |

बिभेमि भीष्मात्सुश्रोणि त्वं च भीष्मपरिग्रहः ||२२|| *The Mahabharata 5: 172*

(It was thus, O thou of Kuru's race, that the lord of the Salwas rejected that maiden who addressed him in language such as this and who was sobbing in grief so tenderly. *Go, go, --*were the words that Salva said unto her repeatedly. I am in terror of Bhishma, O thou of fair hips, thou art Bhishma's capture! *The Mahabharata*, Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Uluka Dutagamana Parva: Section CLXXVI)

There was this added problem of Amba having spent time under another man’s roof, which stigmatized her more than the abduction. Princess Amba had no other option but to return to Bhishma and ask him to marry her, but he reminded her of his vow of lifelong celibacy. Insulted, she retired to the forest where she met sage Parashurama, the Rama with the battle-axe. He agreed to fight Bhishma, his own disciple on her behalf.

The epic describes this battle between the titans at length, and it was Bhishma who turned out to be the winner. Parashurama acceded defeat and declared:

प्रत्यक्षमेतल्लोकानां सर्वेषामेव भामिनि | यथा मया परं शक्त्या कृतं वै पौरुषं महत् ||१||

न चैव युधि शक्नोमि भीष्मं शस्त्रभृतां वरम् | *The Mahabharata BORI 5:187*

[Rama said, 'O damsel, in the very sight of all these persons, I have fought according to the best of my power and displayed my prowess! By using even the very best of weapons I have not been able to obtain any advantage over Bhishma, that foremost of all wielders of weapons! O beautiful lady, go withersoever thou wishest! Seek the protection of Bhishma himself! Thou hast no other refuge now! (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Uluka Dutagamana Parva: Section CLXXXIX)]

The two patriarchs - Bhishma and Parashurama - made peace with each other and asked Amba to return to her father. She instead went back to the forest to immolate herself but was saved by the Great God, Mahadeva, the Guardian of the Marginalized, Lord Shiva Himself, who promised her that she will be reborn a man and then take revenge by killing Bhishma:

तां देवो दर्शयामास शूलपाणिरुमापतिः | मध्ये तेषां महर्षीणां स्वेन रूपेण भामिनीम् ||७||

छन्द्यमाना वरेणाथ सा वब्रे मत्पराजयम् | वधिष्यसीति तां देवः प्रत्युवाच मनस्विनीम् ||८||

The Mahabharata BORI 5:187

[The god of gods, having the bull for his symbol, then said unto that maiden, 'The words I have uttered cannot be false. O blessed lady, true they will be. Thou shalt slay Bhishma, and even obtain manhood. Thou shalt also remember all the incidents (of this life) even when thou shalt obtain a new body. Born in the race of Drupada, thou shalt become a *Maharatha*. Quick in the use of weapons and a fierce warrior, thou shalt be well-skilled in battle. O blessed lady, all that I have said will be true. Thou shalt become a man at the expiration of sometime.' Having said so, the god of gods, called also

Kapardin, having the bull for his symbol, disappeared. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Uluka Dutagamana Parva: Section CXC)]

Thus, Amba was reborn as Shikhandini, the trans-woman, who later became a man. This man called Prince Shikhandi was instrumental in killing Bhishma on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, proving that the memories of marginalization transcended death. Amba's story is an unfortunate saga of love, hate, agency and failed retribution. Even if Amba, as Shikhandi, aided and abetted the death of the Grand sire Bhishma, she did not get the satisfaction of having killed him herself. It was Arjuna who got the glory, or the blame. Amba, says Goldman, was left 'neither a virgin nor a wife' because of Bhishma who had committed 'the theft of her womanhood' (325).

The punishment of the violation of social norms was ultimately death, as we find Amba taking her own life in the fond hope that she will be born a male in the next birth. In comparing Amba's fate to her sisters Ambika and Ambalika, who did not protest against the abduction and remained married to Vichitravirya, Madhusraba Dasgupta laments the fact that 'total submission' brought them "sons, prestige and a place in heaven", whereas Amba's resistance disrupted the social norm and brought her nothing but trouble and unhappiness (*Usable Women* 51-52). Bhishma, the great patriarch, refused to fight a woman, or a man who was a woman in his previous birth. Hence when Shikhandi (who was Shikhandini, the transgender Prince/Princess of Panchal, and, in his previous birth, Amba, the Princess of Kashi) stood in front of him in the battlefield, Bhishma lay his arms down.

पूर्व हि स्त्री समुत्पन्ना शिखण्डी राजवेश्मनि |

वरदानात्पुमाञ्जातः सैषा वै स्त्री शिखण्डिनी ||१६||

तामहं न हनिष्यामि प्राणत्यागेऽपि भारत | ||१७|| *The Mahabharata BORI* 6:94

Bhisma said that this warrior Shikhandi, who was a woman in his previous birth, had been born a transgender and become a man after the boon, so he could not kill her even if he

had to die. Mortally wounded, Bhishma still lived on, as he was entitled to an 'Ichha Mrityu' (death by choice), which was a gift from his father when Bhishma had given up on his right to primogeniture as well as his right to procreate through marriage.

The disdain evident in Bhishma's words for women and transgender shows how deep the roots of misogyny were. The transcendental memory of abuse that Amba retained had survived death. As Shikhandini/Shikhandi she waited for the right time when she could avenge the insult that Bhishma had heaped on her - first by abducting her, and then by spurning her. But in not choosing to fight her in a fair battle patriarchy ultimately had the last laugh. Bhishma chose to die, but not fight a social and sexual inferior – a woman turned transgender. Amba's is a rare instance of female to male trans-sexuality in the Great epic. Moving up the caste and the gender ladder was difficult. Andrea Custodi points out:

It is doubtful that a woman could be cursed to manhood the same way that both Arjuna and the Yaksha are cursed to femininity. A woman who wants to become a man, on the other hand, constitutes a direct challenge to the social and political status quo, and her sexual transformation thus must be allayed, undermined, unauthenticated, made only temporary, or outright denied (217).

Judith Butler strongly contends that gender is neither innate nor natural. Rather, it is a social construct which serves the establishment in its hyper-masculine agenda. In '*Gender Trouble*' (1990), Butler points out that gender is the performative effect of reiterative acts, and the rigid regulatory framework in which these acts are repeated makes them 'congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being' (33). She observes that the stable gender core that the dominant discourse brings into existence is a myth, as the corporeal signs that are supposed to be eternal are fabricated by the normative expectations (33). Butler says that the performativity of the gendered body is evidenced by the fact that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality (136). She considers

'gender norms' another name for 'regulatory fictions' (141) which control our ways of being. Butler asserts that gender is a construction that regularly conceals its genesis, and the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polarised genders as cultural fiction is obscured by the credibility of those productions and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them (140).

Butler finds drag subverting the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity because in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency' (*Gender Trouble* 137). She says that drag suggests a dissonance between sex and performance, sex and gender, and gender and performance, because the so-called sex of the performer is not the same as the gender being performed. Gender, according to Butler, is nothing but a parody. It parodies the 'supposed' original (ibid 138). The assumption is that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today (*Bodies That Matter* 21). David Halperin, in his book *Saint Foucault* (1995), describes Queer identity as a positionality:

Queer is whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. It refers to an identity without an essence. 'Queer', then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative... [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance (62).

This positionality is evident in the gender-bending cases found in *The Mahabharata*, especially in the fascinating account of Yuvanashwa, the Pregnant King, which is yet another instance of the subversion of the normative.

Yuvanashwa, the Pregnant King

In one of the lesser known stories in *The Mahabharata*, Yuvanashwa, the ruler of Vallabhi, became pregnant. The conception was by accident – he partook of the consecrated water meant for his wife. This sacred water had been blessed by the sages who had organized a yajna (sacrificial ritual) to grant a son to the royal couple. King Yuvanashwa, thirsty after a fast, chanced upon the pot of consecrated water and drank it. In some time, he started experiencing the symptoms of pregnancy. In due course of time he gave birth to a son:

शुष्ककण्ठः पिपासार्तः पाणीयार्थी भृशं नृपः | तं प्रविश्याश्रमं श्रान्तः पाणीयं सोऽभ्ययाचत ||१२||

ततो वर्षशते पूर्णे तस्य राज्ञो महात्मनः | वामं पार्श्वं विनिर्भिद्य सुतः सूर्य इवापरः ||२५||

The Mahabharata BORI 3:126

The consecrated water was meant for his wife who sought to conceive, but because of his indiscretion the King became pregnant, and at the end of a hundred-year long pregnancy, splitting the left side of his body, a son who blazed like the Sun God was born. In a unique case of male bonding and collusion Lord Indra, the King of the Devas, offered to nurse the infant. The new-born was named “Mandhata” (By me shall he be nursed!):

मामयं धास्यतीत्येवं परिभाष्टः स वज्रिणा |

मान्धातेति च नामास्य चक्रुः सेन्द्रा दिवौकसः ||२८|| *The Mahabharata BORI 3:126*

The story goes on to document how the young father turned mother of Mandhata struggled with internal conflict and trauma when he could not declare himself the mother. His heart was bursting with maternal emotions, but he had to contain himself and not go public for fear of ridicule. The two fathers –Yuvanashwa and Indra, strong and powerful in their own right – could not fight the stigma that came attached with the change of gender dynamics. For Mandhata it was a lifelong identity crisis –being the son of a mother who was a male by gender.

In their analysis of queer sexuality in “*The evolution of third-sex constructs in ancient India: a study in ambiguity*”, Zwilling and Sweet (2000) speak of the “Three Sex Model” which was an important feature of the ancient Indian worldview (99). Gleaning from the pre-classical Brahmanical, Jaina and Buddhist texts, they discover an inherent sexuality distinct from the biological sex and gender roles. Focusing exclusively on males, due to the lack of data on female third-sex sexuality, they regret to note that the gender benders are considered as tragic flaws in the routine as they go against the natural binary framework (100).

While discussing their ‘Three sex paradigm’, Zwilling and Sweet bring out three main factors – first, the bio-genetic myths that speak of an androgynous or a hermaphrodite ancestor; second, the emerging ‘virility obsession’ in the later Vedic age, which resulted in the manufacturing of ritual strategies for combating perceived threats to a fragile sense of manhood; and third, the development of a technical grammatical terminology (ibid). The authors say that the propensity towards ‘androgynous thinking’ is evident from the Rig Veda onwards, which provides the basic conceptual underpinning for the formation of a third - sex concept:

According to the Rig Veda, the world before creation lacked all distinctions and contrasts, including those of sex and gender. In order to express the sexlessness of the source of creation, Rigvedic poets often resorted to androgynous or hermaphroditic images, for example, a male with a womb, a bisexual bull... such imagery continues into the later Vedic period. The Brahmanas and the Samhitas often describe the male creator, Prajapati, as having a womb and being pregnant (Shatapatha Brahmana 8.4.2.1) or as a male mother having breasts in Jaiminiya Brahmana 1.225. (*The evolution of third-sex constructs* 101)

Zwilling and Sweet refer to the multifarious prayers and rituals to secure potency for oneself and to destroy it in an enemy or a rival (Rig Veda 9.19.7), a proof that this ability was

seen as a fragile quality that might easily be lost. They say that the term ‘napumsaka’ first appears in Maitrayani Samhita 2.5.5, as a sacrificial victim in rites to restore vitality (102). They consider ‘napumsaka’ a polysemous term, carrying connotations of lack of procreative/generative ability. The authors conclude that after considering a ‘millennium’ of texts, they find the ‘third sex’ a residual category, comprising a wide variety of non-normative biological, gender-role and socio-behavioural traits. They suggest that an ‘alternative’ way of approaching the ‘Indian’ material would be in terms of a more fluid concept, such as gender-liminality (123). They observe that the third sex is defined in opposition to the two other, more basic and privileged sexes:

Therefore, the third sex could not exist on its own, but only as it participates in a negation or combination of male and female traits.... In the earliest and the most influential formula defining napumsaka, ‘neither male nor female’, it (C) is negatively posited as ‘not A (male) because it is B (female), and not B because it is A (ibid).

The authors note that this form of syllogism provides the foundation of the peculiar ‘poverty of content’ they have noted in medical and grammatical literature on the subject. They identify the need of more research in this area, which would open new pathways to throw more light on these ‘enduring denizens of the Indian cultural landscape’ (125).

Brodbeck characterizes such instances of sex-reversals and change as ‘playful narrative tropes’ (*Gender and Narrative* 19), but we must add that the epic in its wisdom has never been frivolous. Even the burlesque scene in the Virata Parvan where the young prince of Upaplavya discovers the reality of the great warrior Arjuna is there with the specific purpose of portraying an inversion of the roles.

दीर्घा वेणीं विधुन्वानः साधु रक्ते च वाससी ||२७||

विधूय वेणीं धावन्तमजानन्तोऽर्जुनं तदा |

सैनिकाः प्राहसन्केचित्तथारूपमवेक्ष्य तम् ||२८|| *The Mahabharata BORI* 4.36

[Having said this, Dhananjaya, the son of Kunti, coming down from that excellent car ran after that prince thus running away, his own long braid and pure red garments fluttering in the air. And some soldiers, not knowing that it was Arjuna who was thus running with his braid fluttering in the air, burst out into laughter at the sight. And beholding him thus running, the Kurus began to argue, 'Who is this person, thus disguised like fire concealed in ashes? He is partly a man and partly a woman. Although bearing a neuter form, he yet resembleth Arjuna. (Ganguli, *The Mahabharata*, Book 4: Virata Parva: Go-harana Parva: Section XXXVIII)]

In his work *Shiva, the Goddess and the disguises of the Pandavas and Draupadi*, Hildebeital (1980) deliberates on the Indo-European Tri-Functionalism and the theme of Brahmacharya in Arjuna's disguise (147). In his case, of course, the condition of being a transgender was temporary and for a specific purpose. Brihannala, the transgender dance -instructor of princess Uttara was a much-accepted member of the Virata household. This and similar examples make one disagree with Zwilling and Sweet who said that the third sex person in India was hardly accorded an honoured social position.

Budh and Ila: Alternating between Genders

The Mahabharata speaks of those who alternate between genders, for example, King Sudyumna (King Ila) who became Queen Ilaa, the mother of Aila Pururava. "The learned Pururavas was born of Ila. It hath been heard by us that Ila was both his mother and father" (*Adi Parva: Sambhava Parva: Section LXXV*). This happened because of the anger of Lord Shiva, who turned the King into a woman for having trespassed into the enchanted forest where Shiva was residing with Parvati. The great Lord could be the only male in that forest. The curse was modified when Sudyumna begged Shiva for forgiveness. The modified punishment was that he would remain a woman half the month, to become a man in the other half. So, when

the moon waxed Ila turned into a man, only to become a woman when the moon waned. When a woman she was the beloved wife of Budha, the patron of the planet Mercury, and when a man she was his companion. Thus, Budha who was neither male nor female married Ilaa who was both male and female, making them the first trans -couple.

Dumézil notes that Ilaa, the daughter of Manu, has a Vedic presence (Rig Veda, X, 95, 18). He cites the early ritualistic literature where she is Manu's daughter as well as the personification of his oblation. Dumézil refers to one constant tradition which says that after journeying to visit the moon god, Ilaa was obliged to change sex several times: “According to the Linga Purana (1, 65, 19), she was even transformed into a Kimpurusha, which is to say into a monster, half-horse and half-man, a variety, already, of Gandharva”(*Mitra-Varuna: an essay on two Indo-European representations* 90). In her work ‘*Queer Theory: An Introduction*’, Anamarie Jagose finds the term ‘queer’ referring to ‘those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire’ (3). Biddy Martin notes that ‘the opposition set up between conventional understandings of gender as stable core and postmodern conceptions of identity as the effect of discursive practice needs to be displaced, not decided in one direction or the other’ (*Sexualities without Genders and other Queer Utopias* 118).

Jagose, Martin, Foucault, Halparin and other queer theorists condemn the marginalisation of peripheral sexualities which goes against human dignity and the autonomy to choose one’s identity. A discourse on Queer subalternity in *The Mahabharata* makes us investigate the role of the established binary which persecutes the gender-queer and prevents the celebration of the multiplicity of sexual identities. Anamarie Jagose says that heteronormativity has failed to recognise the ‘mismatches between sex, gender and sexual desire’ (*Queer Theory* 3), leading to serious consequences and implications for those living on the intersection of gender identity.

The systematic subordination of those living on the periphery of gender may have been a practice, but the matrix of domination has been questioned through the resistance put up by the gender-queer, who found ways to skirt the marginalisation, as we have seen in the case of Amba, re-born as Shikhandi. Amba's revenge may have been served cold in her re-birth as Shikhandi, but she did manage to deliver it on the battlefield of the Kurukshetra where Bhishma fell because he would not lift arms against a 'woman'. Despite the derisive laughter and insults from the members of the royal court who thought Arjuna could not fight because her was the transgender Brihannala, we see him decimating the Kaurava army at the end of the 'Agyatavasa' (the year of living incognito). Yuvanashwa and Bhangashwan, mighty kings both, were supremely comfortable in their roles as 'mothers'. Foucault observes that where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power:

The existence [of power relationships] depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal... or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, which, by definition, can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (*The History of Sexuality* 95-6)

Seidman asserts that Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority, than an analysis of the Hetero/ Homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviours, social institutions, and social relations -in a word, the constitution of the self and society (ibid).

King Bhangashwan who chose to remain a Woman

In the preceding instances we observe that but for one case, that of Shikhandi, all the other examples were of transition from male to female gender, but essentially as a temporary means to some end (Arjuna as Brihannala, Ila as Ilaa, Yuvanashwa as the mother of Mandhata). As opposed to Arjuna, Ila and Yuvanashwa who became women only to revert back to being men again, we have the rare story of King Bhangashwan who chose to remain a woman. The debate whether it is a man or a woman who enjoys sex more was answered very comprehensively by King Bhangashwan who had been turned into a female because of the curse of God Indra (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 13: Anusasana Parva: Anusasanika Parva: Section XII). The King had unwittingly invited the wrath of Indra by ignoring him and worshipping Agni in a sacrifice called Agnishtum, for which he had to pay with his masculinity. Ultimately, after proving his point, Indra was appeased enough to offer it back but King Bhangashwan who had enjoyed femininity and motherhood refused to give up on it (ibid). In the 13th Book of *The Mahabharata* when Yudhisthira asked Bhishma as to who enjoyed sex more, men or women - स्त्रीपुंसयोः सम्प्रयोगे स्पर्शः कस्याधिको भवेत् | एतन्मे संशयं राजन्यथावद्वक्तुमर्हसि ||१|| (*The Mahabharata BORI* 13:12), the latter cited the example of King Bhangashwan who, by choosing to continue in his feminine state, answered the question and settled the debate:

वमुक्तस्तु देवेन्द्रस्तां स्त्रियं प्रत्युवाच ह | पुरुषत्वं कथं त्यक्त्वा स्त्रीत्वं रोचयसे विभो ||४६||

एवमुक्तः प्रत्युवाच स्त्रीभूतो राजसत्तमः | स्त्रियाः पुरुषसंयोगे प्रीतिरभ्यधिका सदा ||४७||

एतस्मात्कारणाच्छक्र स्त्रीत्वमेव वृणोम्यहम् ||४७|| *The Mahabharata BORI* 13:12

[The lady said, 'I desire to remain a woman, O Sakra. In fact,--do not wish to be restored to the status of manhood, O Vasava.--Hearing this answer, Indra once more

asked her, saying,--Why is it, O puissant one, that abandoning the status of manhood thou wishest that of womanhood? Questioned thus, that foremost of monarchs transformed into a woman answered, 'In acts of congress, the pleasure that women enjoy is always much greater than what is enjoyed by men. It is for this reason, O Sakra, that I desire to continue a woman, as a woman derives much greater pleasure than man under the circumstances, thou hast asked. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 13: Anusasana Parva: Anusasanika Parva: Section XII)]

King Bhangashwan, the 'lady' in question, refused manhood and chose to remain a woman, proving that gender was not cast in stone. The aforementioned examples of gender-queer personalities like King Yuvanashwa who was Mandhata's mother, Lord Indra who was the wet-nurse of the prince, Arjuna the cross-dressing dancer and eunuch called Brihannala, King Bhangashwan who chose to remain a woman, Ila-Ilaa who alternated between genders prove that the queer -discourse in the Indic myths was an enduring concern. From the innumerable examples of contempt towards the third gender, we gradually move to situations where the gender-queer starts making its presence felt. Being upwardly mobile, of course, was a privilege that did not come easy to the gender-fluid characters. Though we detect agency and efforts to gain representation, we find the pace slow and a kind of perpetual prejudice. Amba's is a rare instance of female to male trans-sexuality in the Great epic. Moving up the caste and the gender ladder was next to impossible. We see Shikhandini, the transgender, borrowing manhood from the Yaksha Sthunakarna, but the condition was that it will be duly returned after the task is over. The dilemma has been noticed by Custodi who puts it across in the following words:

It is doubtful that a woman could be cursed to manhood the same way that both Arjuna and the Yaksha are cursed to femininity. A woman who wants to become a man, on the other hand, constitutes a direct challenge to the social and political status

quo, and her sexual transformation thus must be allayed, undermined, unauthenticated, made only temporary, or outright denied (217).

The above-mentioned examples open spaces of conversation regarding queer sexuality, marginalization, resistance and empowerment, challenging the normative heterosexual order. In her work '*Women, Androgynes and Other Mythical Beasts*', Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty classifies the queer characters in the following categories:

Liminal figures [that] include the eunuch, the transvestite (or sexual masquerade), the figure who undergoes a sex change or exchanges his sex with that of a person of the opposite sex, the pregnant male, the alternating androgyne (male for a period of time, female for a period of time), and twins... (284).

The emergent picture of *The Mahabharata* is that of a fluid text trying to document the resistance of the queer. Both male and female characters are seen calling such men as shy away from battle, eunuch or 'kliba'. It is more the lack of 'male characteristics' that is lamented, as we see in the case of Draupadi who calls Yudhishtira a king without the chastising rod - 'Nadanda'. In '*Freud's Mahabharata*', Hildebeitel speaks of castration anxiety and draws attention to Andre Green's concept of 'the dead mother', considering Kunti the bellicose mother who is dead to the angst of the peace-loving Yudhishtira (7). In rethinking Bose's Oedipal mother Strachey and Freud speak of trauma, loss of memory and the return of the repressed (247).

An analysis of the epic characters studied for this chapter, i.e. Shikhandi, the transgender prince of Panchala, Yuvanashwa, the pregnant King, Ila/Ilaa who swung between gendered identities, King Bhangashwan, who chose to remain a woman and Arjuna, the great Pandava warrior, who spent one year as a trans -gender cross-dressing dancer Brihannala makes it evident that irrespective of the biological gender of the subject, their actions can be delineated as signifiers which demonstrate how the alternative identities of the epic characters

transcend their biological identities, their symbolic positions defining them as male or female, or sometimes male and sometimes female. It reminds one of how the miraculous births of the great warriors and saviours like Drona and Kripa did not involve a human mother. The receptacle was immaterial - it was the male prowess that gave birth.

Mary Carrol Smith suggests in *'Epic Parthenogenesis'* (2011) that these stories are variants of an archetypal male supremacy myth, and such births are the result of the archaic warrior spirituality imaged in the process of male birthing (81). She draws our attention to the 'Twice born motif' and to the fact that even Agni was a twice born – once born in the firesticks and then born in the consecration (ibid 86). The concept of Twin-ship on the level of abundance, vitality and fecundity, as emphasized upon by Dumézil in *Archaic Roman Religion* (252), reminds us of the birth of Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi to Drupada, the King of Panchal, the birth of Kripa and Kripa to sage Sharadwat Gautam and others like Yama and Yami, Nakula and Sahadeva, Lakshmana and Shatrughna, Lava and Kusha and the Ashwini Kumaras. Like Apollo and Artemis of the Greek mythology and Ahirman and Ahur Mazda of the Zoroastrian mythology the twins in Indic myths seem to represent the dualistic principle of nature.

Supporting the idea of dualism in nature, Alf Hiltebeitel identifies a remarkable coherence in terms of symbolism in *The Mahabharata* which communicates the fundamental concerns of mankind through a sustained narrative medium. He relies on the living traditions that have continued as folk culture, an apt example being the Tamil version of *The Mahabharata* where Draupadi as 'Tiraupati Amman' is seen as Goddess Parvati, and Arjuna as Shiva, with his face painted half blue, half rose and his left side sporting a breast (*Shiva, the Goddess* 153). Hiltebeitel citing Biardieu, sees a similarity between Arjuna as Brihannala and Shiva Nataraja (ibid 156). Arjuna's body was transformed after a wrestling match with Shiva.

Did the God who was ‘Ardhanarishwara’ bless Arjuna with the gift of androgyny? Hildebeitel draws our attention to the fact that Arjuna was also called ‘Savyasachi’ – one who could shoot arrows even by the left hand, which again is the half which Goddess Uma resides in Lord Shiva’s body, and Arjuna’s Raudra fire let loose after twelve plus one years could only be compared to ‘Kalagni Rudra’(The Blaze of Death).

Arjuna’s Gandiva in the battlefield looked like a whirling wheel of fire which reminds us of Nataraja Shiva dancing in a circle of flames (*Shiva, the Goddess* 157). Hildebeitel also draws our attention to the fact that in the folk renditions of *The Mahabharata*, even Bhima is seen dressing up in the garb of Draupadi to lure Keechak to his death (ibid 163), which is reminiscent of the post -epic myth of Shiva as a seductress with toothed vagina killing the Demon Adi (ibid 173). The association of the epic heroes with the God who embodies Purusha (culture) as well as Prakriti (nature) grants recognition to the former. The epic justifies the transformation of Arjuna into Brihannala, the cross-dressing transgender by narrating the story of Urvashi who lusted after Arjuna, and when spurned by the warrior prince cursed him with the life of a eunuch for one whole year:

Thus, addressed by Partha, Urvashi was deprived of her senses by wrath. Trembling with rage, and contracting her brows, she cursed Arjuna, saying, 'Since thou disregardest a woman come to thy mansion at the command of thy father and of her own motion--a woman, besides, who is pierced by the shafts of *Kama*, therefore, O Partha, thou shalt have to pass thy time among females un-regarded, and as a dancer, and destitute of manhood and scorned as a eunuch. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 3: Vana Parva: Indralokagamana Parva: Section XLVI)

This curse was useful when the Pandavas had to remain incognito during one year of ‘Agyatavasa’ (living unseen without being discovered), as Arjuna chose to be Brihannala, the eunuch, who taught dance and music to Uttara, the daughter of King Virata. The ease with

which the great epic effects the transition of one of its greatest heroes into genderfluidity is significant and evocative of the great God who was half male and half female.

Shakambari Jayal brings out the instances where the epic warns the King against women and transgenders, who are mentioned among vices created out of intoxication (*The status of women in the Epics* 230). Women, says Jayal, were considered as one of the causes of hostility, leading to excessive expenditure, loss of prosperity, talk among servants and destruction (ibid). Women, as well as transgendered people, were seen as child-like characters, unable to keep secrets, so they were obviously not permitted to attend secret councils (ibid).

In his work '*Fathers, sons and gurus: oedipal conflict in the Sanskrit epics*', R.P. Goldman would have us believe that all the episodes of female sexuality and transsexuality are really about man and male relationships, women being just a 'screen for a power -struggle between males' (336). Yet, in the course of analysing the gender-fluid characters in this chapter, we see that despite patriarchy establishing its hold as the dominant discourse, there are enough examples of people who marched to a different drum. The discourse accommodates them, either to criticise or to celebrate, but the debate is on. The purpose of the dialogic text is served.

In her book titled '*The Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*', Nikki Sullivan (2003) questions the construct of the 'absolute' woman - who would be someone who has the reproductive organs associated with female biology, secondary characteristics such as a 'womanly pelvis', not much body hair, a high voice, and so on, who is sexually passive, and whose passions and emotions fit with those deemed 'feminine' (ibid 96). Sullivan agrees with Hirschfeld who says that 'these kinds of absolute representatives of their sex are only abstractions, invented extremes' (ibid 97), claiming that, in reality, such creatures do not exist, with every person containing, at least to a small degree, elements of the 'other' sex. Drawing from this construct, we see gender-queer characters like Yuvanashwa, the pregnant King, who

was a male as well as a female, the planet 'Budh' who was neither male nor female and Shikhandi who was a transwoman turned male and Ila/Ilaa who alternated between masculinity and femininity.

Judith Halberstam argues that if gender is a fiction which we all live in varying ways, then it must also be possible to rewrite bodily being, to 'rewrite the cultural fiction that divides a sex from a trans-sex, a gender from a transgender'(F2M: *The Making of Female Masculinity* 226). She contends that bodies are gender strange to some degree or another, and there is a need to question 'the transsexual models that assign gender deviance only to transsexual bodies and gender normativity to all other bodies, as also the heteronormative models that see transsexuality as gender deviance and homo-sexuality as a pathological perversion (ibid 153-4). The delusion of a centralised, primary and stable gender core is discursively maintained across world literature. The regulation of sexuality through the insistence and maintenance of the obligatory frame of heterosexuality has been a phenomenon witnessed over centuries. The political regulations and disciplinary practices encouraged by the essentialist nature of the dominant discourse reveal the paranoia.

Queer theorists like Foucault, Butler, Halparin and others have tried to prove that heterosexuality and homosexuality are cultural fictions, and the desires, gestures and acts of the non-normative identities are fluid. The structures of control regulate the sexual field, arbitrarily deciding what according to them is normal. Butler says that it is crucial that we acknowledge this, because 'the displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological "core" precludes an analysis of' culturally and historically specific systems of power ((ibid 136).

John D'emilio argues that gay men have not always existed. He says that they are, instead, a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era, their emergence being associated with the relations of capitalism. In '*Sexual Politics*', D'emilio

suggests that the free labour system of capitalism has allowed large numbers of men and women in the late twentieth century to call themselves gay, to see themselves as part of a community of similar men and women (102). But on the contrary, the attempts at resisting essentialism by encouraging the multiplicity of sexualities have a long history in India. The gender-fluid characters have a significant presence in the epic. The journey has not been easy. They had to painstakingly prove their worth, testing gender identities, choosing to remain with one or the other identity or swing between the two, at times even taking birth again to resolve the transcendental memories of trauma and victimization. This makes *The Mahabharata* the first written text which alters subjectivity, sexuality, and social relations through gender-transformation.

Crossing the Threshold of Condemnation/Celebration

In his article titled “A Man in Woman - The Figure of Chitrangada in *The Mahabharata*, Tagore and Rituparno Ghosh” (2015), Saurabh Bhattacharyya brings out the multi-layered ambivalence with which the issue of the queer has been taken up in our canonical texts. He analyses Chitrangada, one of the love-interests of Arjuna, as an ambisexual figure who has also been treated with the same ambiguity down the ages. While comparing the three cases of representation of the mythical Chitrangada, Bhattacharyya brings out the teleological vision of the poet of the Mahakavya. Through the evaluation of the three narratives, two literary and one film, the episode of Chitrangada in *The Mahabharata*, Tagore’s representation of Chitrangada in his 1892 eponymous dance drama later transcribed into a play ‘Chitra’ published in 1913, and Rituparno Ghosh’s use of the metaphor of Chitrangada in his film ‘Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish (2012)’, Bhattacharyya highlights the existential conflict that emerges in *The Mahabharata* (*A Man in woman* 22-24). Princess Chitrangada, though a woman, has been raised like a man, dressing in male attire, to compensate for the lack of a son. Though she is

brought up like a man, she can never be the heir apparent, the future ruler, hence her role as 'Putrika' - one whose son will become the King. There is a social imposition of ambivalence in her gender, says Bhattacharyya, which delineates the different levels of representation in the treatment of the queer. He brings up the legal compulsions that were behind rearing up Chitrangada as a boy even though she was an attractive woman. Bhattacharyya says:

By the boon of Shiva, all the heirs of the family she has been born in, have been male for the last few generations. Thus, in being brought up as a man, despite being a well-endowed woman, the figure of Chitrangada both valorises and contests the conventions of patrilineality.” (*A Man in woman* 26)

Saurabh Bhattacharyya agrees with Kristeva who says that the shift from patrilineality could be seen as encountering the 'abject' as neither the subject nor the object and would open up a third space for contestation and conflict (ibid). Bhattacharyya observes that *The Mahabharata* started the tradition of raising questions about the response of the society regarding the queer in Chitrangada, something that later became more insistent in Tagore. Tagore's 'Chitrangada' (1892), a warrior princess who had captured Arjuna on one of her hunting expeditions, falls in love with him but faces rejection because of her androgenic looks. She approaches the God of love to grant her the looks that would captivate Arjuna, but as Manipur goes for war Arjuna longs for the original Chitrangada, the androgenic warrior princess. The following lines of Tagore may be taken as a very succinct expression of the queer in Chitrangada. "The friends of Chitrangada ask Arjuna whether he was already wary of womanly temptations and has now started indulging in absurd longing, looking for a man in a woman?", quotes Bhattacharyya (*A Man in woman* 27). He observes that the bipolarity of the warrior and the woman gets merged in Tagore's Chitrangada as she celebrates the identity of the self, rather than the assumed or perceived identities.

This flexibility to critique is what makes the Indic Discourse on Queer myths different and special, introducing us to a fluid, non-gender-binary world which accommodates diverse sexual orientations and identities and allows them to co-habit on the same plane. The role models and survivors that the gender-queer community has put forth defy identification. As we have seen, the epic presents Shiva, the male God who was half woman, Vishnu, the male God who became a complete woman, Shikhandi who was neither man nor woman and Ila/Ilaa who was both man and woman. *The Mahabharata* records the myth of Yuvanashwa, the pregnant king and Bhangashwan, the king who became a sage's wife, and refused to become a man back again. All these gender-fluid characters are achievers and role-models in their own right, yet do not fit into a rigid gender identity.

Thus, we see that the queer discourse in the Indic myths problematizes gender-normative hierarchical perceptions and demonstrates the resistance and the will of the genderqueer to survive. It provides a meaningful third option to the hegemonic binary, thus queering the paradigm. Though the voices are muffled and at times even distorted by the gendered ventriloquism of the centuries, the resistance and subsequent thinking that the grand epic manages to foment comes out strong. Prince Shikhandi who was Princess Shikhandini before he borrowed the male organ from the well-meaning Yaksha, Yuvanashwa, the Pregnant King, who took great pride in unravelling the mystery that was motherhood, King Ila who became Queen Ilaa and alternated between genders are examples of queer resistance and subsequent acceptance. From the condemning evidences against the transgender, to rejoicing in the popular mainstream image of Mahadeva as 'Ardhanarishwara' (the God who was half-female) and Vishnu as Mohini, the Enchantress, a long road is traversed, making heroes like Shikhandi or Yuvanashva symbols of resistance. The ultimate victory is that of the marginal, in this case contesting Spivak who lamented that the subaltern can never have a voice (*Can the Subaltern speak?* 27).

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

A selective reading of the ‘others’ in *The Mahabharata* brings us to the realization that the Hindu ethos does not essentialize gender, nor does it privilege a static, dominant hegemonic discourse. It is a way of life that teaches through reflection - airing thoughts, generating ideas and initiating opinions, to keep the discourse alive. K. Kunjunni Raja summarizes it for us:

“In great literature as well as in real life, the problems that confront people in different situations are not based on the conflict between right and wrong, between Dharma and Adharma, but on the conflict between different, and often opposing duties. When there are opposing pulls from strong moral values, such as Truth and Non -violence, the problem is to decide what to do in the context.” (*Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata* 49)

The text studied for this thesis, *The Mahabharata*, has survived three thousand years of adaptations and retellings, creating the foundation on which the rule of Dharma has been established in our country. While describing the epic as a dispassionate recital in dignified rhythmic narrative of a momentous theme of action fulfilled by heroic characters and supernatural agencies under the control of a sovereign destiny, Gayley (1899) says that the poem awakens the sense of the mysterious, the awful and the sublime. He finds the epic uplifting and calming the strife of frail humanity through perilous crises (*Methods and Materials of Literary Criticism* 424). Sukthankar considers *The Mahabharata* a dateless and

A research article titled “Questioning the Lexicon of Silence: Subversive Women in The Mahabharata” based on this chapter is under review by *Indian Literature, Sahitya Akademi's bimonthly journal*.

and deathless poem which forms the strongest link between India, old and new. “*The Mahabharata* has certainly not ended in becoming a Chaos, as Oldenberg imagined. It has ended in becoming The Cosmos, as it presents a profound and universal philosophy leading to a glowing synthesis of life,” asserts Sukthankar (*On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* 124). The timeless text still casts a spell, painting in exquisite strokes on an enormous canvas, moving from the problems of an internecine strife between brothers, to gender-dynamics, to ethics, morality and other existential dilemmas – the scope is exhaustive. This has been amply utilised by the passionate feminist myth-revisions that have connected the old to the new, continuing with the tradition of generating a debate on issues that matter.

The limitrophic Space of Agency and Empowerment

The Indic myths under the purview of our research reveal a saga of agency, subversion and empowerment, thereby giving the gendered marginal a fighting chance. We find that the margin, in the case of the examples studied for this thesis, did not consist of a disempowered passivity, but a limitrophic space which encouraged permeability. Derrida elucidates the permeability of the limitrophic space in these words:

Limitrophy is therefore my subject. Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I’ll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, de-linearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply. (*The Animal That Therefore I Am* 397)

While situating feminism, Spivak applies the Derridean tool of deconstruction to take the concept of permeability of the limitrophic margin further, enunciating that the gendered subaltern appropriated the agency and scope to secure representation (*Situating Feminism* 2010). In her preface to Derrida’s ‘*Of Grammatology*’, Spivak points out that the margin, in

terms of Derrida's concept of 'différance', undergoes constant 'erasure', giving the subaltern a chance to mobility. Derrida postulates that the sense of being is not a transcendental or trans-epochal signified, but a determined signifying trace. He posits:

This is to affirm that within the decisive concept of ontico-ontological difference, all is not to be thought at one go; entity and being, ontic and ontological, "ontico-ontological," are, in an original style, derivative with regard to difference; and with respect to what I shall later call différance, an economic concept designating the production of differing/deferring. (*Of Grammatology* 23)

Derrida posits that if the present, living, conscious representation of a text is called by the name of discourse, and if the text constantly goes beyond this representation by the entire system of its resources and its own laws, then the question of genealogy exceeds by far the possibilities that are at present given for its elaboration. "In its syntax and its lexicon, in its spacing, by its punctuation, its lacunae, its margins, the historical appurtenance of a text is never a straight line. It is neither causality by contagion, nor the simple accumulation of layers. Nor even the pure juxtaposition of borrowed pieces," contends Derrida (*ibid* 101).

When we apply the Spivakian subalternity to Indic myths, we observe that the gendered subaltern – the women and the queer – keep re-configuring themselves, questioning the patriarchal hegemony and constructing the epistemic paradigms that govern their 'long road toward hegemony' (Spivak, *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason* 310). The shift between agency and marginalization, as documented in the various discourses in the great epic, problematizes the placement of the subaltern, and asks Spivak's famous question once again: 'Can the Subaltern speak?' The answer is "no" at a perfunctory level. But at a deeper level, as we have seen in the previous chapters, the answer is an emphatic "yes" – to those who go beyond the normative patriarchal yardsticks. For them, silence, in many cases, metamorphoses into powerful voices that tell stories of suffering and humiliation, but most importantly, stories

of subversion and resistance against a treacherous society where the marginals can escape only through death.

The extent of subversion depended on the ‘irreducibility of the margin’ (*In Other Worlds* 107), making the situation look rather grim at times - as in the case of Renuka who was ‘silenced’ by a beheading – but the very fact that these myths have managed to come down to us across centuries, and have not been ‘silenced’, speaks volumes. Renuka emerged a goddess with considerable mileage, alive even today in the southern states of our subcontinent. The readers of *The Mahabharata* were exposed to the coup de grace delivered by Uloopi, the princess of the Nagas, to Arjuna, the Pandava. The epic narrates the subversive story where Arjuna was killed by his son Babhruvahana, at the behest of his mother Uloopi, who, in a dramatic development, brought him back to life right there on the battlefield. This exercising of agency by the woman has been brought down to us by the epic, not allowing patriarchal designs to silence it. The references to women as infantile and untrustworthy were stereotypes that were mirrored faithfully, but for every such woman who was ‘incapable of completing her task’ the epic brought forth a Savitri who fought with Yama and brought her husband Satyavana back to life; for every woman who ‘did not deserve independence’ there was a Shakuntala who chose to marry on her own, and forced her reluctant husband, King Dushhyanta, to accord her the position she deserved:

But if thou refuse to do what I supplicate thee for, O Dushyanta, thy head this moment shall burst into a hundred pieces! The husband entering the womb of the wife cometh out himself in the form of the son. Therefore, is the wife called by those cognisant of the *Vedas* as *Jaya* (she of whom one is born. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Sambhava Parva: Section LXXIV)

The model of feminism and gender-equilibrium in the great epic records a shift from the western model of the dominant male occupying the centre and the gendered subaltern

relegated to the periphery. This binary is made problematic by recurring narratives which show the marginal taking charge, as we have seen in the case of Shikhandini, the trans-woman, who changed her gender and became Shikhandi, the Prince, to kill Bhishma. The epic informs us that Shikhandini was Amba in her previous birth. Amba's name came at the helm of the list of women who would not forgive and forget. In fact, the trauma of the marginalisation was such that Amba committed suicide, only to be re-born as Shikhandini, who later became Shikhandi, ensuring justice and representation for herself. Amba's revenge may have been served cold, but it was served all right, proving that memories of marginalization transcend death.

The Mahabharata as a Dialogic Text

The Mahabharata did not portray a 'perfect' world, because life was not perfect, and this great text was the book of life. There was constant mobility, as those on the periphery moved to the centre, and vice versa, depending on the demands of the situation. The marginal had the chance and the choice to represent its case. That was how King Yuvanashwa celebrated his pregnancy and gave birth to a child, who was then wet-nursed by another male - the god Indra. King Sudyumna alternated between genders – when a woman he/she was the beloved wife of Budha, the patron of the planet Mercury, and when a man he/she would be his companion. King Bhangashwan who had been turned into a female because of the curse of God Indra, enjoyed femininity and motherhood and would not give up on it even when the curse was revoked. The fluidity of the Indic myths is evident in such gender-bending narratives which question the binaristic closure.

Susan Sellers divides Feminist rewriting in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction – of bringing into being enabling alternatives. She maintains that Feminist rewriting thus includes ironic mimicry and clever twists as well as a whole gamut of tactics that would open the myth from the inside as well as out, leaving in place enough of the known format to provide

evocative points of reflection for its reader, but also encompassing different possibilities and other points of view (30). In her essay *'The Laugh of the Medusa'*, Helene Cixous (1976) insists that women must write themselves, and women should write about other women. The reasons why women have been violently driven away from writing are the same as their being driven away from their bodies, posits Cixous. It is all about power and control, so they must be brought back to writing, forcing their way into the textual world, the real world and history. The male-generated discourse hardly does justice to the feelings, emotions and reality of the feminine world, hence the need of putting a woman's body into the body-politic (875).

The Mahabharata emerges as a culture-scape where a woman is stationed on the highest pedestal, that of 'Devi', the alter-ego of the male God. She is the energy - He is the form. As against the Abrahamic mythology, there is no 'Fall', nor is the woman created out of man (*Genesis 2*). There are innumerable examples of the Devi prevailing over the God, making Him see Her point of view. The image of Kali with her tongue dripping blood, standing astride Shiva, the Mahadeva (God of Gods, Great God) is etched in our collective mindscape. No male could kill Mahishasura, the buffalo-demon – it took a woman to annihilate him. Yudhishthira propitiates the Devi in these words:

O thou that hast slain the *Mahishasura*, that thou art praised and worshipped by the gods for the protection of the three worlds. O thou foremost of all deities, extend to me thy grace, show me thy mercy, and be thou the source of blessings to me. Thou art *Jaya* and *Vijaya*, and it is thou that givest victory in battle. Grant me victory, O Goddess, and give me boons also at this hour of distress. Thy eternal abode is on Vindhya--that foremost of mountains. O *Kali*, O *Kali*, thou art the great *Kali!* (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 4: Virata Parva: Pandava-Pravesha Parva: Section VI)

Vishnu without Lakshmi, and Shiva without Parvati, were incomplete and powerless. The image of Shiva as the ‘Ardhanarishwara’, the Androgyne, was the culmination of this beautiful harmony that has been enshrined in the Indic myths, making *The Mahabharata* and *The Puranas*, for example, the Devi Bhagawatam, some of the earliest Feminist Texts in the world. The confidence, the conviction and the supreme belief in her superior position is evident in Devi’s words:

I am called Lakshmi, Bhuti, and Sree! I am Faith, I am Intelligence, I am Affluence, I am Victory, and I am Immutability. I am Patience, I am Success, I am Prosperity. I am Reverence, I am Fate, and I am Memory. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 12: Santi Parva: Mokshadharma Parva: Section CCXXVIII)

We find the dialogic text deliberately taking up conflicting positions, because without that no debate would have been possible. In Derridean terms, the act of privileging one against another – a concept, an individual, a group – kept the discourse going, giving the society a chance to look critically at itself. Hinduism has never believed in an essentialist philosophy. It has never been a binary – there were myriad shades in between, celebrating not just the mainstream, but also the marginal. The dialogue between the centre and the periphery was an ongoing phenomenon.

This has been beautifully portrayed in the character of Draupadi who commanded authority and was at par with her husbands in terms of stature in the grand epic. Taking all phallogocentric excesses in her stride, she used the tools of patriarchal control as weapons. Draupadi was the sole person who commandeered the Pandava accounts, man-power and public relations, thus making herself indispensable, taking the place that Kunti had as the matriarch. A unique and strong character from the very outset, Draupadi emerged as ‘Vak’ - the goddess Saraswati - in giving the collective Pandava misery a voice in the court of Dhritarashtra. She also came across as ‘Shri’, the goddess of wealth, who brought the Pandavas

into wealth after marriage and in possession of the Kingdom after the war. As a gendered subaltern, she was subject to patriarchal bindings. But from the miserable hand that Draupadi was given by the epic, she pulled out an ace and completed the straight, becoming the mascot of feminist subversion.

The epic woman's engagement with the centre was far from passive. Two examples stand out for their characteristic candour and confidence, where men - Kings and Princes - were forced to listen to a woman and abide by her diktats. One was the epic story of Sulabha, the wandering mendicant who visited the city of Mithila and defeated King Janaka in a metaphysical discourse. The second was the rousing narrative of Queen Vidula, the fire-brand mother of Prince Sanjaya, who convinced her son of the necessity to fight and win the war of Dharma.

In the first narrative, Sulabha, the protagonist, was a wandering mendicant and a yogini of an advanced order. By dint of her advanced yogic powers, she could enter the body and minds of others. The Shanti Parva of *The Mahabharata* reports that Janaka, the father of Sita, was requested to engage himself in a metaphysical debate with the Yogini Sulabha. Janaka, an erudite and level-headed Philosopher-King, encouraged such interaction with sages who would discuss the true nature of Brahma. He took pride in the fact that he was the King of 'Videha' i.e., despite living in a physical body, he was unattached to the ways of the world. Though a King and a householder, Janaka claimed that he was also a practitioner of the 'Nivritti Marg', the path of salvation through renunciation, a claim not accepted by Sulabha.

Hence to test the veracity of the claim, Yogini Sulabha abandoned her ascetic self, and transformed herself into a ravishing beauty. When she was brought into the royal court, King Janaka was filled with wonder about her delicate form which did not really match with her description as a sage-mendicant. He was in for some more surprise, as with the help of her yogic powers, Sulabha colonised the mind of the King by entering his thought-process and his

understanding. A yogini of advanced practice, she could hypnotise King Janaka, tying him with Yoga bonds, but he defeated her intentions by seizing her resolution with his own resolution. Livid at this indiscretion, King Janaka questioned Sulabha's lack of propriety, and asked her as to why she had entered his gross body and mind:

To what reason is thy entrance to be ascribed into my Kingdom or my Palace? At whose sign hast thou entered into my heart? Thou belongest to the foremost of all the orders, being, as thou art, a Brahmana woman. As regards myself, however, I am a Kshatriya. There is no union for us two. Do not help to cause an intermixture of colours. Thou livest in the practice of those duties that lead to Emancipation. I live in the domestic mode of life. This act of thine, therefore, is another evil thou hast done, for it produces an unnatural union of two opposite modes of life. I do not know whether thou belongest to my own *gotra* or dost not belong to it. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 12: Santi Parva: Section CCCXXI)

King Janaka reproached Sulabha on four counts. According to him, their association was wrong because not only did they belong to two different Varnas, Gotras and Ashramas, there was this further question of her marital status which was not known to the King. Convinced of her ulterior motive, Janaka asked Sulabha if she had committed this immoral act because of her 'perverted intelligence'. Thoroughly flustered, he blamed her of possessing an evil nature and unrestrained behaviour. He informed her that by endeavouring to display her superiority, she had made it obvious that she was wicked, and her objective was not just to defeat Janaka, but to also humiliate the learned and very superior Brahmanas of his court and exalt herself at their expense. Janaka accused Sulabha of being jealous of his powers and making improper moves:

Thou hast caused a union of thy understanding with mine and thereby hast really mingled together nectar with poison. That union, again, of man and woman, when each

covets the other, is sweet as nectar. That association, however, of man and woman when the latter, herself coveting, fails to obtain an individual of the opposite sex that does not covet her, is, instead of being a merit, only a fault that is as noxious as poison. Do not continue to touch me. Know that I am righteous. The enquiry thou hadst wished to make, viz., whether I am or I am not emancipated, has been finished". (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 12: Santi Parva: Section CCCXXI)

But Sulabha's enquiry was not over yet. In fact, it was her turn to show the King that she was more than her looks, which was actually a camouflage to catch him off-guard. The assumption that a young, beautiful girl would always be 'available' was nullified by Sulabha's words, which, according to *The Mahabharata*, were 'more handsome than her person'. Sulabha informed the King that just as lac and wood exist together, so does everything else in this world. Just as the five faculties of sound, touch, taste, form, and scent, though diverse, yet function together as one, similarly, happiness and sorrow, life and death, acquisition and loss, the agreeable and the disagreeable - the set of opposites - coexist. Sulabha edified Janaka about the 'Adwaita' principle which sees Jiva and Brahma as one:

They that are conversant with Adhyatma behold Prakriti as the cause of all creatures. That Prakriti which is Unmanifest, becomes manifest in the form of these principles. Myself, thyself, and all others that are endued with body are the result of that Prakriti. The constituent elements of the body undergo change every moment in every creature. When such is the state of the bodies of all creatures, who then has come whence or not whence, or whose is it or whose is it not, does it not arise. What connection does there exist between creatures and their own bodies? (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 12: Santi Parva: Section CCCXXI)

Sulabha said that if Janaka had been truly emancipated, he would not have asked questions like who she was and where she had come from. She asked rhetorically as to what

indications of emancipation could exist in him who failed to cast an equal eye on the agreeable, on the weak, and the strong. Like a Guru, she counselled Janaka about the intricacies of statecraft. She informed him that Sovereigns did not sleep easy. Their peace of mind depended on their allies, ministers, capital, provinces, punishment, treasury - the seven limbs of a Kingdom. For Janaka to be the emancipated King, he should sever his attachment with all this while managing them for the welfare of the state, said she. Sulabha reproached Janaka:

It seems that like an ordinary man of the world thou art bound by the bonds of touch and spouses and mansions and the like. What harm have I done thee by entering thy person with only my Intellect? With Yatis, the custom is to dwell in uninhabited or deserted abodes. As a person of the mendicant order resides for only one night in an empty house, I shall reside for this one night in thy person, which, as I have already said, is like an empty chamber, being destitute of knowledge". "Hearing these words fraught with excellent sense and with reason, King Janaka failed to return any answer thereto. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 12: Santi Parva: Section CCCXXI)

In a world where females were denied a voice, Sulabha's assertion of hers was in sharp contrast to the gendered role-play expected of a female. Ruth Vanita says that Sulabha's victory in the debate justifies her own choices in life, which are to remain unmarried, to be a wanderer on the quest for truth, to seek liberation and be one with The Divine. Her actions of entering public debate with Janaka and joining him in a yogic bond points to the degree of self-confidence, subversion and assertion that the marginal had achieved (*The Self Is Not Gendered* 90). Ruth Vanita examines the oft-repeated figure of Sulabha, a single woman and an intellectual-renunciant, and focuses on her discourse with philosopher-king Janaka in *The Mahabharata*. She points out that when Janaka uses misogynistic arguments to analysis Sulabha's unusual behaviour, the renunciate, based on the Hindu philosophical principles,

effectively establishes that there is no critical difference between genders. Sulabha proves by her own case that a woman may achieve deliverance like a man, utilizing the same tools. Ruth Vanita summarizes it thus:

“When we focus on the dynamic debates regarding gender that flourish in ancient Hindu texts, we help combat the stereotype of these texts as either monolithically justifying the subordination of women or as monolithically honouring women. Modern Indian debates about gender have a history that is not traceable to Euro-American feminism alone, a history that defines the questions and poses the answers both similarly to and differently from the way the questions and answers have been posited in Euro-American debates about gender. (*The Self Is Not Gendered* 91)

Sulabha was not alone. *The Mahabharata* narrates the story of Queen Vidula, the firebrand mother of Prince Sanjaya, who encouraged her son to give up on his cowardice and fight for his inheritance. This story, narrated by Kunti to Krishna, who was supposed to communicate it to the Pandavas, was meant to inspire them and get them raring for the great war. Vidula’s son, Sanjaya, though a person of royal descent, was against war and bloodshed. He, in fact, was scared of dying in the battle, which mortified his mother. A Kshatriya Queen, Vidula believed that dying in a battle was a royal duty which ensures riches in this world and the celestial abode in the next. She did not mince words when it came to professing tough love to her son. Not for her the ‘womanly’ qualities of vulnerability and fragility - she was authoritative, ambitious and aggressive. When Vidula found that her son had accepted defeat at the hands of the King of the *Sindhu Desha* and was too dejected to retaliate, she took it upon herself to question his cowardice: “Thou art not my son,” said Vidula, “Begotten thou hast not been by myself and thy father!” She condemned his lack of wrath and informed him that he could not be counted as a man because unlike a true Kshatriya, he feared war. She inspired him

to die while plucking the fangs of a snake, rather than live miserably like a dog. Queen Vidula thundered:

Abandon thy fears! Rise, O coward! Do not lie down thus, after thy defeat, delighting all thy foes and grieving the friends, bereft of all sense of honour! Why dost thou lie down like a carcass or like one smitten by thunder? Do not disappear from the sight of all so miserably. Do not smoulder. Blaze thou up, effectively displaying thy prowess.

Slay thy foes. For but a moment, for ever so small a space of time, blaze thou up on the heads of thy enemies. Display thy prowess or obtain that end which is inevitable!

(*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Bhagwat Yana Parva: Section CXXXIII)

Vidula exhorted her son to live and die like a hero, and if he must fall, he should seize the foe by the hips and thus fall *with* the foe. She made it clear that she would call him a man only if he was wrathful and ready to settle scores. The son, on the other hand, was still not convinced. He wanted to know of what use would her acquisitions be if he died in the battle and she did not get to see him again. Vidula was not one to get swayed by such emotional blackmail. She told him to die rather than live on another's charity. She regretted that like medicine to a dying man, her words were not making any impression on him. Trained in statecraft, Queen Vidula went on to give sound political counsel to Sanjaya. She informed him that the enemy of the enemy was a friend, so it was important to forge strategic alliances. She told him that he should not fear the large number of associates the rival had, as they would have their own compulsions and limitations, and could be managed with a little effort. She reminded him of his name 'Sanjaya', which meant 'the victorious'. She exhorted him to fight till the end:

Thou art competent to encounter all foes if thou dost not cherish the desire of life. If, however, thou art for adopting this mode of life that is fit only for a eunuch, then with

troubled soul and depressed heart it would be better for thee to sacrifice thy life. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Book 5: Udyoga Parva: Bhagwat Yana Parva: Section CXXXIV)

The Mahabharata reports that hearing these inspiring words of his mother, Sanjaya's despair lifted and the true warrior stepped forth. He expressed his gratitude to his mother and said that though during the discourse he was a silent listener, he had taken her nectar like words to heart and intended to follow them. Finally, Sanjaya, the son of Vidula, rose to the occasion and gave a tough battle to his rival, the King of Sindhu Desha, gratifying his mother and his countrymen. Goaded and stirred by his mother, he got ready to 'gird up his loins for repressing his foes and obtaining victory' (ibid).

The narratives of Vidula and Sulabha demonstrate that even in the androcentric ambience of the great epic there were situations where the story was appropriated by women. Brian Black (2007) points out that in *The Mahabharata* women were silent listeners who sat in the background and eavesdropped on the discourse (*Gender and Narrative* 53). He explored the theme of female listeners in *The Mahabharata*, both in terms of how the text represented its projected audience and in terms of how the female characters claimed authority to speak on matters of dharma and moksha:

Despite the text's orientation towards men, its focus on war, and the way it characterizes the ideals of heroism, honour and courage as specifically masculine traits, subsequent Sanskrit texts have accepted *The Mahabharata* as the Veda for women and Shudras, a re-packaging of Vedic teachings in a format made accessible to a universal audience. This chapter asks the questions: to what degree is *The Mahabharata*, a text whose 'main business is the legend of men who were heroes' a text for women? (*Gender and Narrative* 55)

In the narratives of Sulabha and Vidula, it was the turn of men to be silent listeners to the subversive words of woman who were in direct control of the affairs. Barthes (2009) categorizes myth as ‘a form of speech’, a ‘metalanguage’, because it is a ‘second order semiological system’ (*Mythologies* 137) where the meaning is fashioned through the first-order sign and subsequently naturalised. He finds myth hiding nothing and flaunting nothing. Instead, it distorts, as myth is neither a lie nor a confession - it is an inflexion (ibid 153). The change of emphasis and thrust that happened in the narratives of Sulabha and Vidula was representative of similar efforts by the gendered subaltern who celebrated small victories. ‘The logocentric project [the literary history] had always been, undeniably, to fund phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself’, observes Cixous (2000: 266). The mythic stories of Sulabha and Vidula, and similar narratives question this appropriation and validate the efforts of women who never gave up their claim to subversion.

Dialectical Relationship between 'Reality and 'Representation'

We thus come to realize that *The Mahabharata* registers the shift from a strong, matrilineal system to a patrilineal structure that was based on the denial of representation to the gendered subaltern. ‘Matsyagandha’ Satyavati, the mother of Veda Vyasa, the author of *The Mahabharata*, was neither ashamed of her association with sage Parashara (The Mahabharata 1.57.64), nor was she petrified of being ‘found out’, which reminds us of times when a woman was free to make alliances as per her wish, and the child could be known by her name. The Chhandogya Upanishad (4.4 - 4.9) speaks of Satyakama, who did not know the name of his father. He was called Satyakama Jabala after his mother Jabalaa, and unlike later times, when a woman could not give her name to the progeny, this decision of Jabalaa to give him her name was accepted and endorsed by the society (Hume 219). As the transition to a patrilineal worldview happened the notion of purity gained in strength, and the name of the father was the only name that a child could take. The epic apportions the blame: “The maiden

who suffers her virginity to be deflowered incurs three-fourths of the sin of Brahmanicide, while the man that deflowers her incurs a sin equal to a fourth part of that of Brahmanicide (*The Mahabharata*, Book 12: Santi Parva: Apaddharmanusasana Parva: Section CLXV).” This substantiates what Ghosh and Singh (2014) say, “Myth, like all forms of discourse, is propagated by patriarchy to systematically construct the subject, the woman as the ‘other’, the negative of man, in order to perpetuate the social hierarchy and maintain the subjugation and domination of women” (*Reconstructing Draupadi* 12).

While discussing the coming into existence of the body-politic, Moira Gatens says: “Modern political theory typically conceives of political life as a state created by a contract, entered into by rational decision, and designed to ensure the protection and safety of the body and its needs. As it is a contract entered into by men only, one must surmise that it is a contract designed to secure the needs of male bodies and desires” (*Towards a feminist philosophy* 61). The requirements of the body-politic overshadowed the needs of the female body, hence the example galore of women being sacrificed in the name of maintaining lineages. Ghosh & Singh consider the body of the woman as the site for contest where men can take revenge upon other men by violating her sexuality, thus, taking revenge on her ‘owner.’ Referring to Usha Ganguly’s play, *Hum Mukhtara*, an adaptation of Mukhtar Mai’s sensational and inspirational autobiography, *In the Name of Honour: A Memoir*, they bring into focus the protest of the victim of an institution sanctioned gang rape whose body becomes a site of resistance (*Representing and Resisting Rape* 202). Ghosh & Singh analyse the phallogocentric objectification and reductive categorization of the female body which restrain the agency and subjectivity of women. While deliberating on the Post-Colonial Feminism and the use of theory in “*Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post-colonialism*”, Vilashini Cooppan focuses on the conflicts between nationalist ideology and communal concerns, state centralization and regional federalism, and the competing and unequal claims of class, caste,

community and gender. She agrees with Rajeswari Sunder Rajan who finds the unrelenting opposition between the aesthetic and the political as separate cognitive structures playing not only into the opposition dominant/subaltern, but also into other oppositions between form and content, scripts and life-stories, postcolonialism and reality, art and experience and even 'writing' and women, seeking her methodological ground in the conflictual spaces between these oppositions (Cooppan 273). Sunder Rajan suggests that we 'read' gendered subjectivity and resistance rather than hear the critical ventriloquism of subaltern and gendered voices, seeing women as a 'site' for such conflict. She situates this reading in terms of a dialectical relationship between 'reality and 'representation', arguing that the study of 'real' Indian women cannot take place apart from a sustained consideration of 'imagined' women as they are ideologically constructed and discursively situated within the realities of postcolonial India. She observes that women are the sites of such contests than participants in them (Cooppan 274). Sunder Rajan installs in the space vacated at the centre (of history, society, politics) a resisting subject, one who will be capable of the agency and enabling selfhood of the 'active' earlier subject, while at the same time acknowledging the politics of difference (ibid). Rajeswari Sunder Rajan sums it all up in the following words:

Both the trauma of publicity and the sanctity of privacy are for women products of the ideology of the separate spheres. In the narrative of *the Mahabharata*, textual scholars say, it is not so much the disrobing as the forced entry into the public space that Draupadi returns to later (in her recurrent allusions to the time), as the source of her shame. (*The Story of Draupadi's Disrobing: Meanings for Our Times* 333)

Subramaniya Bharati's early 20th century classic, *Panchali Sabadham*, has five Sargas of exquisite lyric clusters, focusing on a single crisis from *The Mahabharata*, that of Draupadi's disrobing in the royal assembly of the Kauravas, and her terrible vow of keeping her hair open till she anoints it with the blood of Duhshasana (Valam 124). Bharati views

Draupadi as a symbol of Indian womanhood and her empowerment. He also saw a political allegory in the timeless conflict between Dharma and Adharma. He saw Draupadi as a projection of India's political consciousness. Draupadi was thus Mother India, while Duryodhana and his allies were the foreign forces of exploitation. Draupadi was the symbol of an oppressed country in shackles but still defiant even in the most critical moment of her ageless life (ibid). Bharati views Draupadi as 'Adi Parashakti' who has descended on earth to restore the balance:

Youthful Uma, Kali Herself the strong,
The original Shakti with the terrible bow,
The Mahamaya that destroys illusion,
Who is thrilled by ghosts, murder and corpses,
Who saves all through smiles while riding her lion?
The Queen of all who is served
By the Rider of the dark Buffalo,
Who is surrounded by the guards Prosperity,
Riches, Longevity, Fame and Knowledge
Herself the work; she the Destruction
The novelty of the past and the present,
Through the ages of change and re-change
And inner change; she the Custom—
Adi Parashakti!
(Nandakumar 167)

Thus, we see that whether it is Bharati's Draupadi, or Mahashweta's Dopdi, or Bhyrappa's Hidimba, or Karve's Kunti, or Amba who was reborn as Shikhandini who became Shikhandi, or Renuka who became Yelamma, the goddess of the marginal, it is the gendered subaltern trying to break out of the patriarchal construct. The re-tellings that draw upon *The Mahabharata* - to question, to condemn, to be in sync with the meta-narrative, or to find countless permutations in between - are all within the purview of the grand design of the epic, whose aim is to initiate a discourse on the existential dilemmas of mankind. We realize that the

grand narrative, by design, encourages the gendered subaltern to seize a place in the spaces and the margins of the text. The Indic myths under the purview of our research reveal a saga of agency, subversion and empowerment, thereby giving the gendered subaltern a chance to make itself heard. This resilience of the marginal has been celebrated in the Indic myths.

Keeping in mind the detailed study in this thesis, we understand that there is a requirement to further explore the marginal characters because they are being erased from the public memory due to selective amnesia. There is a need to investigate why Draupadi continues to be remembered as a negative character who brought about a war, when there is ample evidence that she was a victim of circumstances and herself a marginal. Learning more about *The Mahabharata* traditions which have been recorded in other countries like Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Mauritius, Réunion Islands and South Africa, where Draupadi is worshipped as an Amman Goddess, will delineate the Epic trajectory and facilitate our understanding of the subject. It would be fascinating to study the differences in the storyline and the development of marginal characters in the Javanese version of the grand Epic, called '*Kakawin Bharatayudhha*', and the versions of *The Mahabharata* in India. An exclusive study can be done based on the writings of the Indian feminist and gender writers and read *The Mahabharata* entirely from their perspective.

Finally, we come to the conclusion that in the mythic narratives analysed for this study, the gendered subalterns have managed to create and sustain a framework of resistance despite the deep-rooted constraints that marked their life and times. They have become influential examples of struggle, and, at the same time, they have also emerged as prototypes for future generations of marginalized persons, who would draw sustenance from the fact that their predecessors had faced similar humiliation, and in many cases, were able to overcome them. It was about finding one's voice, which, in the course of our study, was lent to the gendered subaltern through the re-tellings based on the great epic.

The Mahabharata has a message for the under-privileged and the down-trodden - that their stories would also be told, and their individualities celebrated. The grand epic, true to its space-time transcending genealogy, attests to such possibilities even today.



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