



Śikhaṇḍī: Unravelling Gender Fluidity in the Mahābhārata

ARADHYA CHATURVEDI

Masters of Arts, Department of History, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi

E-mail: aradhya.chaturvedi251@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores the complex portrayal of gender fluidity in the *Mahābhārata* through the character of Śikhaṇḍī, a figure who transcends binary conceptions of sex and identity. By examining the narrative of Śikhaṇḍī's transformation from a woman *Ambā* to a warrior instrumental in *Bhīṣma's* death, the study interrogates the intersections of gender, dharma, and social hierarchy in the epic tradition. Drawing on philological and semantic analyses, as well as comparative readings of textual variants, the paper situates Śikhaṇḍī within the broader discourse of gender performativity and divine agency. It highlights how the *Mahābhārata* accommodates fluid identities without necessarily subverting patriarchal order, thereby revealing the ambivalent nature of its gender politics. It also attempts to analyze the patriarchal ideals of masculinity, especially *Kṣatriyahood*, and femininity as portrayed in the text and by extension in the society it represents. Through engagement with both traditional commentaries and modern scholarship, the paper argues that Śikhaṇḍī's narrative embodies a liminal space between masculinity and femininity, human and divine, curse and destiny, underscoring the epic's capacity to reflect on the instability of fixed social categories.

Keywords: Śikhaṇḍī, Mahābhārata, gender fluidity, performativity, patriarchy

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INTRODUCTION

The Mahābhārata is a long narrative text in Sanskrit, containing about a hundred thousand verses, which tells the story of five Pāṇḍava brothers, before, during and after the war at Kurukṣetra, between the Pāṇḍavas (and their allies) and their 100 paternal cousins, known as Kauravas, over the kingship of their ancestral realm (Brodbeck and Black 2007: 1). The 'mahā' in the title signifies the size and importance of the text; and the 'bhārata' symbolises their descent from King Bharata. The text comprises eighteen books (parvans) of varying proportions. This Pāṇḍava narrative is not told at a fixed pace; it is punctuated and embellished along the way by the many sub-stories and diverse teachings

which the characters within the narrative tell to each other. These sub-stories are a vital aspect of the Mahābhārata; and are often called *Upākhyānas*.

The Mahābhārata is often hailed as a mirror to ancient Indian society, and oscillates between reinforcing and destabilizing the rigid hierarchies of gender and caste prescribed by the Dharmasāstric texts. Historians have analysed and researched upon the various facets of the text, including social identities, gender boundaries, hierarchies within the society, political structures and so on. Among its many multifaceted characters, Śikhaṇḍī stands out as a figure whose narrative challenges the rigid binary of gender. Traditionally understood as a warrior whose identity transcends conventional gender categories, Śikhaṇḍī embodies what modern scholars have identified as gender fluidity. This paper seeks to unravel how Śikhaṇḍī's character problematizes fixed gender roles, offering insights into ancient Indian perspectives on gender as well as their resonance in contemporary gender studies.

It is pertinent to mention here the problems that confront a modern historian while reading and interpreting ancient texts. A diverse range of problems are faced by us, especially in case of the Mahābhārata, which *"like an Indian jungle...spreads out before us in an endless wilderness of trees entwined and tangled with rank creepers, coloured and scented with manifold flowers and blossoms, and the home of every kind of living creature,"* writes Meyer (Meyer 1953: 1). The first limitation is an obvious one, that the entire discussion is based on a single text, that too, a part of the expansive text. The Mahābhārata represents what is in fact a closed dialogue among men, furthermore, an elite class of men, in all senses of the word. Thus as Prof. Jaya S. Tyagi points out, *"representations of women usually do not reveal how women were actually living, nor do they deal with issues related to their daily existence"* (Tyagi 2014: 8). Another challenge lies in understanding the nature of the text. The Mahābhārata, writes Dhandh, is a highly multiform text, representing several types of literature simultaneously-legal/theoretical, moral/didactic, mythic/narrative, philosophical/reflective (Dhandh 2008: 16). Thus, extracting information regarding one particular aspect turns out to be highly arduous and tends to overshadow the other aspects present in the text.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN MAHĀBHĀRATA

Historically, many societies have operated under the assumption that biological differences between males and females determine their respective gender roles and societal functions. Judith Butler challenges this notion by asserting that gender is not simply the result of biological sex but is instead shaped by cultural and social forces. She distinguishes between terms sex and gender, opining *"whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex"* (Butler 1999: 9). Butler suggests a radical discontinuity between sex and gender, emphasizing gender as performative rather than inherent. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of 'identity' to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted social temporality. Arti Dhandh summarizes the term 'sexuality' to mean *"a set of anatomical features, which are then encoded by cultures with meaning, to yield the concept of gender"* (Dhandh 2008: 2). A study of sexuality thus embraces the concepts of both sex and gender.

The Mahābhārata plays a crucial role in shaping gender roles in ancient India, serving as a foundational cultural narrative that has influenced Indian social norms across various interpretations over time. The epic not only defines gender through the societal roles assigned to men, women, and other identities but also uses symbolic imagery, motifs, and metaphors that do not always align directly

with real-world concepts of masculinity and femininity. Beyond its teachings on spiritual growth, kingship, and warfare, the Mahābhārata contains sections that focus on marriage, sexual relationships, daily rituals, and specific rites for women, along with guidelines governing interactions between men and women. These aspects provide rich material for analysing gender dynamics within the text (Brodbeck and Black 2007: 16).

HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP ON GENDER & MAHĀBHĀRATA

The study of gender in historiography has evolved significantly over time. With the rise of feminist movements and critical theory in the 20th century, historians began interrogating how gender roles were constructed, maintained, and challenged across different societies and time periods. One of the first studies directly to address gender-related issues in the South Asian context was A.S. Altekar's *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*. According to him, "*Women once enjoyed considerable freedom and privileges in spheres of family, religion and public life; but as centuries rolled on, the situation went on changing adversely*" (Altekar 1936: 335). Indeed, a number of studies of female characters in the Mahābhārata have assumed the 'Altekarian paradigm', reading the depiction of women in the text as chronicling their declining status in ancient India (Brodbeck and Black 2007: 15). Uma Chakravarti (Chakravarti 1993: 1-3), however, rejects this Altekarian model to suggest the existence of patriarchy from the very inception of society.

Chakravarti puts forth that the concept of *strīsvabhāva* is inherent to Mahābhārata, saying that "*the congenital fickleness of women's nature is specially pertinent to the problem of dealing with the innately overflowing and uncontrollable sexuality of women. Thus in the ancient texts it is repeatedly stated that they can never be trusted; further it states that they are difficult to control. The cunning tricks of the demons are known to be unique to women*" (Chakravarti 1993: 3). Chakravarti also demonstrates that the sexuality of women in Mahābhārata is looked down upon and the demoniac and destructive lust of women is considered to be their "true nature." She cites the example of a female ascetic to whom Aṣṭāvakra is sent in preparation for marriage repeatedly attempts to seduce him, in spite of her advanced age. She tells Aṣṭāvakra that for women there is no greater delight nor more destructive urge than sex, that even very old women are consumed by sexual passion and that women's sexual desire can never be overcome in all the three worlds (Mahābhārata Anuśāsana Parva: 20.59-60;64-67).

Shalini Shah states that the empirical data from the Mahābhārata on sexuality is highly diffused giving a tantalizing glimpse of widely differential societies and cultures. While agreeing with Chakravarti, she pens, "*The Mahābhārata provides us with extensive data on the age of promiscuity, an age where the notion of female chastity and faithfulness were non-existent*" (Shah 1995: 73). The example cited by her is of Anuśāsana Parva, where Bhīṣma, "*in spite of having remained celibate throughout his life,*" tells Yudhiṣṭhira "*No man is dear to women except that who gives them pleasure at the time of sexual intercourse, for the duration of the act.*" Shah also points out the existence of homoerotic relations between women. One reference in the Anuśāsana Parva, where Pañcacūḍā tells Nārada, that when women find no males at hand, they satisfy each other's desires. (Shah 1995: 75). Evidently then at some point of time, writes Shah, "*this freedom for women was rejected and this is reflected in the statement of Dīrghatamā and the law of Śvetaketu which enjoined upon women to be faithful to their husbands, for otherwise they would be considered sinners and regarded as fallen*" (Shah 1995: 70-1).

The Mahābhārata offers narratives of resourceful, active and verbally and spiritually accomplished women, but which at the same time, contains hoards of misogynist maxims. Stephannie Jamison comments, “*in story after story women see what needs to be done, take command, and order the bewildered, hand-wringing male participants into their supporting roles – and the enterprise fails only when one of these ninnies messes up his part of the woman’s plan*” (Jamison 1996: 15). Jamison explains these contrasting portrayals of women “*do not seem to inhabit the same conceptual planet*”. Thus the Mahābhārata mainstream portrayals of female norms are repeatedly questioned, challenged, and subverted by the speech and behaviour of characters who do not conform to these models, and even by that of characters who usually do.

Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black have edited a comprehensive work on gender in Mahābhārata, titled “Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata”. They show that another way in which normative gender roles are subverted and challenged is through the Mahābhārata’s several gender-bending characters. The notion of a third sex, or of a gendered identity that is neither male nor female, appears in a number of sources from ancient India (Brodbeck and Black 2007: 19). The words like *napunsaka* and *klība* point to the recognition of a third biological category in ancient India. Brodbeck and Black postulate that despite the recognition of the third-gender, the gender bending that takes place in the Mahābhārata does not necessarily constitute a third sex, nor does it necessarily challenge the binary framework. First of all, the most well-known cases of gender bending are instances of transsexualism, that is, changing from a man to a woman, or from a woman to a man, rather than the assumption of a third-sex identity. The episode of Ambā, according to them, “*offers limitations of being a woman in... male-dominated social world*” (Brodbeck and Black 2007: 20)

Robert Goldman assesses the dilemma that Ambā’s character faces. He comments, she is no longer able to be a virgin or a wife and thus she has “*no socially viable alternative to the death she chooses. It is this that gives rise to her strange vow to inflict upon the author of her dilemma the consequences of his theft of her womanhood*” (Goldman 2017: 392). Madhusraba Dasgupta explores Ambā’s character by comparing her fate with that of her sisters, Ambikā and Ambālikā whose ‘total submission’ affords them sons, prestige and a place in heaven; by contrast, “*Ambā’s resistance disrupted the social norm and brought her nothing but trouble and unhappiness . . . For all her single-minded efforts, Ambā did not, after all, have the satisfaction of exacting revenge on her own*” (Dasgupta 2000: 51-2).

Irawati Karve, in her work *Yugānta*, notes that Bhīṣma, for his treatment of the princesses of Kāśī, was strongly denounced by Śiśupāla during the aśvamedha yajña of Yudhiṣṭhira. Śiśupāla lost his temper. “*Bhīṣma, your whole life is a blot on the name of the Kṣatriyas. Though it was known to all that Ambā had been promised to Śālva, you abducted her. Your brother, being a saintly king did not marry her, so she naturally came to you; but you rejected her. After your brother died his queens were yours by right. Instead you had a Brāhmaṇa secretly father their children. You are not celibate, you are just impotent!*” (Karve 1969). In the entire Epic, this seems to be the only place where Bhīṣma, the patriarch is held accountable for “abducting Ambā, even while knowing that she loves another.” Other places seem to only glorify this act. The Mahābhārata, Karve observes, does not show that there was any attitude of chivalry towards women. But no man had shown the utter callousness that Bhīṣma had. Still, we cannot say that Bhīṣma committed all this cruelty deliberately. It seems that he was indifferent to it. He had sacrificed himself completely. He no longer lived for himself.

Kevin Mcgrath posits that femininity is a quality which cannot be modified or in any way altered and thus would seem to approximate to an absolute.

“The account of Ambā provides the Epic with an internal and inherent portrait of boundary and function; only men take up arms and destroy. For a woman to cross this line is for her to suffer extraordinary mental anguish. Violence is a solely male privilege and the power of women lies in their ability with speech. Without Ambā the Pandavas could not have found victory at Kurukṣetra for the hero Bhīṣma was too great to overcome... If there's one epithet that can be ascribed to the women heroes of Mahābhārata, it is grief: duḥkha or śoka.” (Mcgrath 2009: 113).

A GENDERED NARRATIVE OF ŚIKHAṆḌĪ

The narrative of *Ambā/Śikhaṇḍī* is placed in a section called *Ambopākhyāna* in the *Udyoga Parva* of the *Mahābhārata*, where *Bhīṣma*, while describing the warriors of their enemy's army to *Duryodhana*, announces that he “won't strike *Śikhaṇḍī*” (*Mahābhārata*, *Udyoga Parva*, 169.19-20). He declares that since he was a woman earlier, and that *Bhīṣma*'s conscience won't allow him to kill a woman or someone who was earlier a woman. Upon being questioned by *Duryodhana* about the reason why he won't fight *Śikhaṇḍī*, *Bhīṣma* narrates the tale of *Śikhaṇḍī*'s previous birth. After the demise of King *Śāntanu*, *Citrāngada* is crowned King, but dies soon after. Thus *Bhīṣma* then crowned his younger half-brother *Vicitravīrya* to the throne. *Bhīṣma* then wishes to find a suitable (From a family with similar standing: *anurūpādīva kulāt*) bride for him. (*Mahābhārata*, *Udyoga Parva*, 170.8).

Around the same time, *Bhīṣma* heard that the three daughters of the King of *Kāśī*, *Ambā*, *Ambikā* and *Ambālikā*, were about to have a *svayaṃvara* held for them. After having consulted his step-mother *Satyavatī* he, riding a single chariot, rushed to *Kāśī*. There he saw numerous kings gathered to attend the event, and after challenging each one of them for a battle, he abducted the three princesses and put them on his chariot. Then he defeated all the great *Kṣatriya* kings and princes in the quarrel that followed. On this particular occasion, writes *Mcgrath*, *Bhīṣma* has hijacked a *svayaṃvara* and transformed it into a *Rākṣasa* form of matrimony (*Mcgrath* 2009: 58). After having won, *Bhīṣma* carried these three princesses away to *Hastināpura* and offered them to *Satyavatī*, to be married to *Vicitravīrya*. *Bhīṣma* then narrates the whole incident to *Satyavatī*, “having defeated the princes, these daughters of the King of *Kāśī*, whose bride price was bravery, were won by me for the sake of *Vicitravīrya*.” (*Mahābhārata*, *Udyoga Parva*, 171.2). *Satyavatī* with teary eyes, appreciated *Bhīṣma* for his conquest and gave her blessings for the marriage.

A problem arises when the eldest daughter of *Kāśīrāja*, *Ambā* approaches *Bhīṣma*, knowing his reputation for being true to his vows, she tells him, “I have already chosen the king of *Śālva* as my husband in my heart, and I was previously, in secret, chosen by him. This secret is not even known to my father.” Interestingly, when this tale is narrated in the *Adi Parva* at 96.48, it is said that *Ambā* received the consent of her father, when she and *Śālvarāja* fell in love (*eṣa kāmāśca me pituḥ*) Yet, when she herself speaks in the *Udyoga Parva* at 171.6 she says that the affair was clandestine (*rahasi*). Whether this is a mistake or the poet's nodding or her own equivocation is uncertain. *Ambā* then requests *Bhīṣma* to let her go as *Śālva* awaits her (*Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva*: 171.6-9) This girl has already undergone the process of a previously settled espousal or the *gandharva* form of alliance. For the *rākṣasa* marriage to be lawfully successful, pens *Mcgrath*, a girl cannot have participated in a *svayaṃvara* or any other forms of marriage (*Mcgrath* 2009: 60).

After consulting *Satyavatī*, *Bhīṣma* permits her to depart with her maid and a group of old *brāhmaṇas*. Unfortunately, her abduction has tainted her and when she reaches the *Śālva* kingdom, the king spurns her, for she has become *anyapūrvā*, ‘a woman previously betrothed,’ and he is no longer

seeking a bride (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva:172.4). He asks her to leave and go to *Bhīṣma* for she was won by him. Mcgrath points out that though they had verbally given their words to each other in private, the *rākṣasa* marriage holds sway, cancelling the *gandharva* ritual, which had been put to process but was not completed. *Śālva* says that he cannot bring into his house a woman who has had a former husband or *parapūrvā* (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva:172.7).

Ambā appeals to *Śālvarāja* that she was led by force weeping. She implores that it is against the dharma to abandon those who are faithful. But, *Śālva* continues to reject her as a ‘snake its old skin’. The poet seems critical of *Śālvarāja* and refers to him as ‘cruel/*kauravya*’ (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva: 172.21), ‘nearsighted/*adīrghadarśin*’ (Ibid.:172.18) and ‘stubborn/*nāsraddadhat*’ (Ibid: 172.25). *Śālva* admits that he is afraid of *Bhīṣma* and that *Ambā* has now become *Bhīṣma*’s “property” (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva: 172.22). Thus concludes a *rākṣasa* marriage which had tragically gone awry, and which ultimately becomes the cause of *Bhīṣma*’s death. Up to this time, pens Irawati Karve, “*Bhīṣma*’s life had been blameless, no one had to die cursing him. *Ambā* was the first person he had ever injured. Later there were to be many others” (Karve, 1969).

Having been spurned by the man to whom she had pledged herself *Ambā* sets out on a life of embittered wandering. She is now without a kin, without the man whom she had loved and even repelled by her abductor *Bhīṣma*, for he has taken a terrific vow of celibacy. She curses *Bhīṣma* for her grief, curses herself and her “*stupid father with deluded mind (mūḍhacetasam)*”, who “*by fixing valour as my price, sold me like a sex worker (panyastrīvatpraveritā)*” (Mahābhārata, Udyoga Parva: 173.5). She stays in the forest with a group of male ascetics. They are troubled and hesitant about accepting her. Then arrives *Rājarsi Hotravāhana*, who turns out to be *Ambā*’s maternal grandfather and suggests to her that only *Jāmadagnya Rāma* can put an end to her sorrow. *Jāmadagnya Rāma*, the son of *Rṣi Jamadagni*, is a shady arch-hero of the epic who has instructed several of the greatest warriors of the epic in martial skills, including *Bhīṣma* and *Karṇa*. Equated with the sixth incarnation of *Viṣṇu* called *Paraśurāma*.

On meeting *Rāma*, *Ambā* implores that he must “*kill Bhīṣma*”. *Rāma* is obliged by the force of her speech to challenge *Bhīṣma* to a battle. *Rāma* tries to persuade him to accept *Ambā*, but he refuses stating that “*No man would knowingly keep a woman who loves another in his house, for she is like a serpent (vyālīmiva) and this ‘defect’ of women, causes disasters*” (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva: 178.21). *Rāma* fails to overpower *Bhīṣma* and conceits defeats. He then instructs *Ambā* to go wherever she pleases or take the refuge of *Bhīṣma* himself, for he is ‘invincible’. *Ambā* refuses outrightly and pledges to go to a place where she can defeat *Bhīṣma* in the battleground (Ibid: 187.9). Thus, *Ambā* sets off alone determined to practice ferocious austerities in order to gain the powers that will defeat her abductor. Contemplating his death she goes off to the forest. Eventually she becomes a river, a stream called *Ambā*, with half of her body and is born in the kingdom of *Vatsa*, with the other half. In that birth too, she continued with rigorous penance, despairing, “*I shall take my revenge from Bhīṣma, who is the cause of my misery; because of whom I am devoid of the world of my husband and live in this world neither like a man nor even a woman.*” (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva: 188.4). There remains only one course, “*I am disgusted with feminine nature and am resolved to masculinity.*” (Ibid.: 188.6). *Śiva* appears to *Ambā* drawn down by her fearful austerities giving her the boon she desires. Mcgrath states that it’s something “*only males usually accomplish*” (Mcgrath 2009:112). Now she will be a man, a *mahārathī*, born into the clan of *Drupada*. Thus having constructed a pyre, *Ambā* ignites it and enters the fire, terminating her life.

She was born again as a girl to the wife of *Drupada*. Strangely, her new parents refused to admit this fact concerning her femininity and brought her up as if she were a boy, they kept her femininity a secret from her birth because *Śiva* had blessed *Drupada* with a girl who would later transition into a boy. At maturity they are determined to find a wife for this girl-boy; it is as if destiny continues to elude her. They married their daughter-son to the daughter of the King of *Daśārṇa*. Eventually the young new wife discovers that her husband is actually a woman and informs her servants and companions. Mcgrath opines that it is “*as if the poets are toying with every possibility of sexual differentiation, including transvestism*” (Mcgrath 2009: 112). The woman *Śikhaṇḍinī*, realising that her father-in-law intended to attack her father out of anger at being so deceived, fled once again to the forest, always a place of neutrality. A *yakṣa* with whom she meets offers to exchange his *pumśaliṅga* ‘male sign’ for her *strīliṅga*, ‘feminine sign’: that is genitalia. The problem of salutary marriage is thus resolved to the relief of all parties.

After a span of many years, *Śikhaṇḍī* eventually participates in the great battle at *Kurukṣetra*, fighting on the side of the *Pāṇḍavas*. At one point in the fray, *Bhīṣma*, having encountered *Śikhaṇḍī* and having “*recalled his femininity*” (Mahābhārata *Bhīṣma Parva*: 82.26), turns his back away to keep his vow of never striking at a woman. Thus, writes McGrath, “*despite his overt masculinity, the femininity of Śikhaṇḍī is so intrinsic as to pervade the true nature: this is not so much a previous life but more of a transsexual state*”. In the battle that follows, *Bhīṣma* remains invincible, as he had been all of his life. Karve, however, refuses to accept that *Bhīṣma* would have been so difficult to defeat. She shows that he would have aged between ninety to a hundred years old, thus, it is only out of respect that the *Pāṇḍavas* refused to strike at him. So the *Pāṇḍavas* approach him, seeking a way to strike him down. *Bhīṣma* himself informs *Yudhiṣṭhira* and his brothers of how-using *Śikhaṇḍī* as a shield-they can approach him and slay him, for he refuses to strike at *Śikhaṇḍī*. He further reiterates, “*I don't like to engage in a war with a woman, a man with a woman-like name, one who is perplexed, one who is the only son of his parents and one who is low-born.*” (Mahābhārata, *Bhīṣma Parva*:103.72-3). Thus we note that it's not that just being a woman is a taboo, even having a feminine name is a taboo in itself. *Bhīṣma* is felled by Arjuna who is protected by this human and feminine shield. *Śikhaṇḍī* is martyred later in the *Sauptika Parva*, thus ending the story of a character in *Mahābhārata* whose aspirations could only be achieved by attaining masculinity and who had faced the challenges of being a female throughout.

A SEMANTIC STUDY OF THE TEXT

The study of gender is not only historical and sociological but also deeply embedded in language and meaning. Semantics, the branch of linguistics concerned with meaning, plays a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing gender identities, roles, and perceptions. The words, symbols, and linguistic structures used to describe gender influence societal attitudes and cultural understandings of masculinity, femininity, and non-binary identities. A semantic analysis of gender examines how language constructs and conveys gendered identities, whether through direct linguistic markers or through implicit connotations and cultural associations. The *Mahābhārata* uses a variety of words to describe masculine and feminine attitudes; I, using my knowledge of Sanskrit, have attempted to point out some of them.

Women in the text have an evidently inferior status to that of men, often that similar to non-living objects; *Bhīṣma*, after having “*accrued/upārjitā*” (Mahābhārata *Udyoga Parva*:171.2) the

three princesses of *Kāśī*, “*offered*” (*satyavatyai nyavedayam*) them to *Satyavatī* (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva:170.22). *Bhīṣma* had taken the decision of abducting these three princesses, not on his whim, but with “*complete support from Satyavatī*” (*satyavatya mate sthitaḥ*) (Ibid.:170.6). Within this narrative, *Satyavatī* is the only woman to enjoy some degree of autonomy and respect, and interestingly, she being a woman herself, plays a major role in asserting the patriarchal norms that the author supports and tries to justify. We cannot ascertain whether this ‘voice’ given to *Satyavatī* is truly hers or is it just the author’s way to portray *Bhīṣma* as the ideal son or for that matter, an ideal *Kṣatriya*. It is pertinent to inform, that it is outside the purview of this study to find the basis and origin of these norms and whether they were truly practiced or were just prescriptions without societal acceptance.

These princesses are also mentioned as *vīryaśulkā* or “*whose price/fee is force*”, revealing the attitude towards women in general. Even the voice given to women by the poet exhibits this attitude, for *Ambā* is portrayed asking *Bhīṣma* to show “*mercy*” (*kṛpām*) (Ibid.:171.9) on her, as if begging to let her do what she desires. At another place *Ambā* asks *Śālvarāja* to keep her in mind (*bhajasva mām*), for she is like his “*devotee*” (*bhaktām*) (Ibid.:172.10) and desires his “*grace*” (*tvatprasādābhikāṅkṣiṇī*) (Ibid.:172.16). There is an inherent notion in ancient texts like the *Mahābhārata* to portray women as lustful characters, as mentioned earlier and as depicted by Shah (Shah 1995:73) and Chakravarti (Chakravarti 1993:3). *Ambā* is mentioned to be “*hurt by the arrows of lust*” after her rejection by *Śālva*, “*anaṅgaśarapīḍitā*” (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva:172.8).

There is another interesting part of the text, where the *yakṣa Sthūna*, after exchanging his gender with *Śikhaṇḍī*, goes back to his abode and when *Kubera* visits him he does not come out of his residence to greet him. When *Kubera* asks for the reason for this disrespect, the other *yakṣas* reply, “*as he has exchanged gender with the daughter of King Drupada, he has now gained modesty due to his femininity, and thus is afraid to come out in front of a man*” (Ibid.:193.37) This is riveting because it reiterates the idea and norm associated with patriarchy that a woman, by nature, is shy or ‘should be’ shy; and that she should stay indoors.

There is also an inherent anxiety within these traditions related to women taking up austerities. The *brāhmaṇas* had continuously persuaded her against choosing penance as her way out; they are resolute that she should not live in the forest and say, “*You are a princess, unworthy of the forest (rājaputryāḥ prakṛtyā ca kumaryāstava bhāmini| bhadre doṣaṃ hi vidyante bahavo varavarṇini), and thus should go back to your father’s home. Seeing you alone here in this deserted forest, God knows how many kings will propose their love to you, therefore you should quit the thought of doing penance*” (Ibid.:174.8-10). The characteristics attributed to women are always ‘feminine’, such as, “*adorned with jewellery/ svalaṅkṛtāḥ*” (Ibid.:170.11) or “*unmatched in beauty/rūpeṇāpratimāḥ*” (Ibid.:170.9), as though they are incapable of any masculine attributes. While femininity is frowned upon, the *pumśaliṅga* is mentioned as “*illuminated/dīptam*” (Ibid.:193.8). Thus, we note the contrast between the conceptions of the two genders.

SYMBOLISM AND HERMENEUTICS

Butler has shown that feminist theory has largely operated on the assumption that a distinct identity, defined by the category of “women,” exists and serves as the basis for feminist discourse and political advocacy. However, both politics and representation are complex concepts. Representation, in one sense, seeks to grant women visibility and legitimacy in political spaces, while in another sense, it

reflects how language either conveys or misrepresents the perceived reality of womanhood (Butler 1999:1). Symbolic representations within the *Mahābhārata* are diverse and varied; they aim to depict narratives juxtaposed within the text, thus making the study of representations interesting.

Several scholars have interpreted the events in the text differently. For Goldman, the fall of *Bhīṣma* is a representation of the oedipal triangle. “Clearly Śikhaṇḍī who, despite his change of sex, remains a woman for *Bhīṣma*, can only represent the missing mother in this curious displacement of the oedipal triangle. Like a mother, he/she intercedes for the son to ward off the destructive rage of the father” (Goldman 1978:334). However, this seems to be an overly simplistic explanation of the events that led up to the fall of *Bhīṣma*. The relationship between *Bhīṣma* and *Arjuna* can be understood as a paternal-filial dynamic, yet Śikhaṇḍī does not fit the motherly role, her grievance with *Bhīṣma* is moral and gendered not familial and her aim is retribution. At the same time, according to Goldman, being killed by *Arjuna* was *Bhīṣma*’s punishment for disobeying a command of his guru *Rāma* (to take *Ambā* back) and then trying to kill him in battle (Goldman 1978:336). It is ironic that this greatest of heroes is felled by one whose name, *Ambā*, denotes ‘mother’ or ‘good woman’, writes Mcgrath (Mcgrath 2009:113). It is also interesting that while in her austerities, *Ambā* assumes the form of a river, contrasting *Bhīṣma*’s character, who is born of a river.

Andrea Custodi shows the lengths to which male characters will go to prove or defend their manhood simply have no equivalent for the female characters, whose femininity is rarely if ever contested (Custodi in Brodbeck and Black 2007:208). She talks about the ambiguousness of *Bhīṣma*’s death at the hands of Śikhaṇḍī noting that:

“a warrior and patriarch of Bhīṣma’s stature being felled by an otherwise undistinguished prince, and even more so a ‘former woman’, an inauspicious transsexual who wears the penis she received from a yakṣa. It both must be and cannot be, and it exists in the epic in precisely this ambiguous, tenuous, unresolved balance. This is suggestive of a tension of contradictions, a dynamic flux of rationalizations and inverted mirror images, continually folding back upon itself and coming out the other end upside down, a circle of discourse that continually seems to be on the verge of lapsing into either tautology or radical contingency.” (Ibid.:222)

Ambā’s agency in the text is continuously challenged; after having “taken permission” of *Bhīṣma* she approaches Śālva and is rejected. While wishing to stay in the forest for penance, the *Brāhmaṇas* dismiss her proposal, possibly not finding her “worthy” of this masculine venture. It is these *Brāhmaṇas* that suggest *Ambā* to revenge *Bhīṣma*, possibly out of resentment. This resentment might stem from *Bhīṣma*’s disrespect to *Brāhmaṇical* laws laid down in the *grhyasūtras*, for he abducted three women without their father’s consent and performed a *Rākṣasa* marriage, which is frowned upon by these texts (Tyagi 2008:124).

There seems to be some kind of tension between the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Kṣatriyas*. The duel between *Bhīṣma* and *Rāma* is an example where *Bhīṣma* not only disobeys his guru, but also is derogatory towards him, calling him an “arrogant warrior, who calls himself a *Brāhmaṇa*” (Mahābhārata Udyoga Parva:178.35). This disregard would otherwise be considered a sin from which *Bhīṣma* walked freely. *Bhīṣma* is ready to kill his guru, the gravest of all sins. He declares that it is not sin to kill a *Brāhmaṇa* “who comes prepared for a war, doesn’t run away from the battlefield, and fights like a *Kṣatriya*” (Ibid.:178.27). Even the *Devas* seem to support *Bhīṣma*, where they remind *Rāma* of his dharma as a *Brāhmaṇa* and orders him to “never to show such courage again, especially with *Kṣatriyas*” (Ibid.:183.10-1). The text describes elaborately what a *Kṣatriya* must and must not do

and *Bhīṣma* seems to exemplify these ideals. These examples seem to align with Mcgrath's argument of the *Mahābhārata* being a poem of the *Kṣatriyas*.

CONCLUSION

The study of gender, through historical, literary, and semantic lenses, reveals its complex and fluid nature rather than a fixed, biologically determined identity. By examining figures like *Śikhaṇḍī* in the *Mahābhārata*, we see how ancient texts engage with gender beyond rigid binaries, allowing space for transformation and fluidity. However, this representation of gender fluidity in *Mahābhārata*, does not necessarily mean the recognition of gender expansive identities. The depiction of *Ambā/Śikhaṇḍī* in the story, might act as a prescriptive notion, pointing out the miseries that women will have to face if they choose love by their own preferences, a privilege that only men enjoy. This theme resonates with other episodes of gender crossing in the *Mahābhārata*, *Arjuna's* year as *Brhannalā*, or the tale of *Illā/Sudyumna* in the *Purāṇas*, which collectively suggest that identity, like *dharma*, is performative and context-sensitive. The text thus anticipates Butler's idea that gender is not a stable identity but "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1990: 140), continuously renegotiated through action and intention. *Śikhaṇḍī's* life, shaped by both divine will and human agency, enacts this performativity within the idiom of *karma* and rebirth, concepts already central to Indic thought.

The historiographical analysis highlights how gender has been constructed and contested across different time periods, challenging traditional narratives that marginalize non-normative identities. Furthermore, the semantic study underscores the role of language in shaping gender perceptions, demonstrating how words and meanings evolve to reflect societal changes. The depiction of women in the *Mahābhārata* follows a linear patriarchal notion. There are taboos related to dominant women, women who speak their will and women who renounce their societal roles. It is evident that "a woman's destiny lies either in her husband or in her father." Furthermore they elaborate, "during the times of comfort, the husband is the refuge of the wife and in the times of crisis, her father" (*Mahābhārata* Udyoga Parva: 174.7).

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