Gender in *Mahābhārata* : Postmodern Perspectives

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Award of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Submitted by

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This thesis titled "Gender in *Mahābhārata*: Postmodern Perspectives" submitted by me for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full for any other degree or diploma of any university or institution.

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(Deepa Verma)

Transliteration Scheme

This is based on Sanskrit and it has been adapted to modern Indian languages through omission, addition, and diacritical modification.

Vowels	**a ā i ī u ū ṛ ṝ ḷ e ai o au**
anusvara	**ṁ**
visarga	**h** (and a . under h)
Consonants	
gutturals	**k kh g gh ṅ**
palatals	**c ch j jh ñ**
cerebrals	**ṭ ṭh ḍ ḍh ṇ**
dentals	**t th d dh n**
labials	**p ph b bh m**
semi-vowels	**y r l v**
spirants	***ś ṣ s h***
conjuncts	***kṣa tra jña***

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

The later half of the twentieth century was marked by the postmodern turn in critical and creative discourse in the West. All the established universal meta-narratives began to be questioned by the diverse posties (to use Richard Rorty's terminology) that emerged in synchrony with the postmodern turn in critical theory, i.e. post-colonialism, post-structuralism and post-feminism (with and without the hyphen), to name the more important ones. The centre-periphery debate was brought up like never before and the plural, deviant, and marginalized voices gained primacy by denouncing the dominant phallogocentricism and compulsory heterosexuality. The emphasis shifted from 'Nature' to 'Culture.' The cultural materialists undertook the task of reinterpreting class, gender and sexual relations in Europe of renaissance period to understand the dynamics of cultural forms and social narratives.

The Western thinkers went back 500 years to re-evaluate Shakespeare in order to cull out the historical interactions between Shakespeare and colonialism and to challenge the established colonial readings of history, culture, and literature of Europe across five centuries. The analysis of renaissance self-fashioning and cross-dressing in the Elizabethan theatre were taken as starting points to break the rigidity of

heterosexuality in the contemporary worldview. The post-feminists felt that a 'female' centred feminism was no longer relevant as it had transgressed its limit of usefulness and that the Second Wave Feminism was unnecessarily shrill and aggressive. Hence, the post-feminists have kept their focus on the cultural term 'gender'. The post-feminists treat gender as a socio-cultural construct and argue that the gender traints are not ingrained in the individual at the time of birth. This post-feminist approach was more liberal and mild than the aggressive stance of the earlier feminists (especially the French feminists) on gender equality.

An attempt to study gender in the Indian context is different from the western perspective. In the Indian tradition, there are no traces of women being treated as the marginalized 'other'. A glance at the position of women in the Dharmaśāstra-s would testify that women were the bedrock of the most important unit of Indian society – family. Kapil Kapoor writes about conception of women in the Dharmaśāstra-s: "Wife-mother is the keystone of the social arch. She is Lakśmī, the one responsible for husbanding the resources. As such she must be honoured. No rites or rituals can be performed without her. In receiving respect in public, she takes precedence over father and teacher" (57). Because of this pivotal role of women in the Indian tradition, India never witnessed a hostile phase of feminism unlike the West.

This is not to say that the history of India does not feature atrocities on women. There have been instances of bias and marginalization, but that has never been the norm. The aberrant social behaviour was never the touchstone of the larger Indian thought. Therefore, a gender study in the Indian context naturally tends to tread the post-feminist path rather than the more radical forms of feminism. There are powerful examples of subversion of gendered roles upon the women and the 'other' gender (often called the third gender in recent times) in the Indian knowledge texts. If the Western thinkers had to revert to Elizabethan age to dig out traces of cultural resistance to challenge the overarching colonial ideology, the Indian narratives composed more than three thousand years ago are powerful tools of analysis of the different aspects of Indian culture and history. For example, the *Mahābhārata*, a cultural and historical text of *dharma*, stands out with its complicated construction of gender. Apart from the numerous other aspects of the text, the construction of gender opens new vistas to explore the text and find new meanings in it. If the *Mahābhārata* would simply be a gendered text in which men and women played their stereotyped roles expressive of their gender, the narration would have lost its surprising and unexpected elements and perhaps the text would have lost its impact by now. In fact, the gendered roles assigned to women have been continually challenged and transgressed in the *Mahābhārata*, which opens the text for diverse interpretations.

In this background, my research topic titled *Gender in Mahābhārata: Postmodern Perspectives* is a study of gender in the text from the postmodern post-feminist perspective. The postmodern post-feminist discourse embraces the discursive construction of gender and challenges the gendered identity of women rather than issues related to them. The reading of gender with a post-feminist approach, an intersection of postmodernism, contributes in answering some intriguing questions, i.e., how a woman would create an identity out of her gendered role and how a woman would acquire a central position and agency in a monarchical society that was considered highly patriarchal and dominated by males.

The cultural construction of femininity as being passive, voiceless, vulnerable, and sweet natured is demanded by post-feminists to be rewritten by women in order to create their own self and identity. Stephanie Genz in the article "Third Way/ve: The Politics of Post-feminism" published in the *Journal of Feminist Theory* (2006) has re-evaluated the tension that existed between feminism and femininity, "establishing a link between previously opposed alternatives, carving out a new subjective space for women, allowing them to be feminine and feminist at the same time without losing their integrity or being relegated to the position of passive dupes" (334).

In literature, the key concept of postmodern discourse is 'the search for identity'. The other theoretical approaches starting with the prefix 'post' such as post-feminism, post-colonialism and post-structuralism are also basically concerned with the question of identity. All these theories functioning under the overarching rubric of postmodernism lead us towards a cultural study that interrogates the authenticity or the reality of the social and cultural system. My study of the *Mahābhārata* will explore how the marginalised genders in the text create their own space, centre, and identity out of the existing cultural and gender binaries.

The most pertinent debate in postmodernism is the centre-periphery discourse. All the theories that aim at construction of 'identity' invariably touch upon the marginal voices gaining centrality in the discourse. The peripheral post-colonial, post-feminist and post-modern subject strives towards attainment of an agency to make its way towards the centre. One fine example of a woman gaining central agency in the *Mahābhārata* is Satyavatī. Being the daughter of a fisherman, she was destined to marry within her own community, culturally and socially. However, she not only became the queen of Hastināpur but also governed and dominated her husband Śāntanu to the extent that Bhīṣma was compelled to take a vow of lifelong celibacy. As mentioned in the beginning, gender construction in the *Mahābhārata* is extremely complicated. Satyavatī is doubly marginalised, being a woman and belonging to the marginalised clan of

fishermen, but she dominates the royal politics of Hastināpur like nobody else. She gets the agency and governing authority through her newly defined femininity.

The *Mahābhārata* is a cultural text and the postmodernist critics are set to question the cultural set up of gender binaries in the text. The world is interpreted by individuals, the cultural and social construction of ideas is made up by individual responses to different things, and such responses cannot be real or true for everyone. Ann Brook has explained that postmodernism is a cultural study, "concerned with debates linking representations and identities within newly defined cultural spaces" (189). The postmodern study of the *Mahābhārata* explores how the representation of characters and their identities are set in a newly defined cultural space. For example, in Indian culture one learns to obey and respect one's elders but the Pāṇḍava-s kill their grand uncles and *guru*-s in the battle while performing their *karma*. As per tradition, a woman's virginity should not be lost before her marriage. However, Satyavatī and Kuntī mother the offspring of Parāśara and Sūrya respectively after gaining an assurance that they would regain their virginity. In this way, they set a new path for other women that a woman could lose and regain her virginity. It is through divine intervention that Satyavatī and Kuntī regain their virginity which modern medical science has also replicated surgically in recent times. Furthermore, the definition of motherhood and

fatherhood in Indian culture is challenged when Gangā kills her own sons and Śāntanu, for fear of losing Gangā by breaking his promise, lets his sons die. When the powerful Pāṇḍava-s lose Draupadī in the game of dice, Draupadī condemns and almost curses the Kuru elders and her husbands for not protecting her. Devayānī expresses her desire to marry Kaca. When he rejects her proposal, she proposes Yayāti for marriage and somehow forces him to marry her. Śarmīṣṭhā, Devayānī's maid, on the other hand, seduces Yayāti. Therefore, one can see how the cultural taboos as well as the gender binaries criss-cross at various stages in the *Mahābhārata*.

In the *Mahābhārata*, women's adoption and appropriation of femininity provides them with the agency and power to challenge their gendered role. One may say that the female characters in the text have definitive feminine traits, but they use their femininity in a positive sense by remaining active participants in every big decision, by speaking and fighting for themselves and by remaining sweet and revengeful at the same time. For example, Draupadī changes the very course of the narration with her presence of mind and logical arguments in the court when she faces humiliation. Had Yudhiṣṭhira not staked Draupadī in dice, the Pāṇḍava-s would have remained as slaves of Duryodhana and the Mahābhārata war would not have taken place.

Judith Butler, an influential proponent of the postmodern approach to gender, in her work *Gender Trouble* (1999) deconstructs the gender

identity: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender. Identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (33). Butler explains that gender creates a fluid identity that is already in a state of suspension. Similarly, the gender binaries of femininity and masculinity are not fixed defining categories for women and men in the *Mahābhārata*. The very definition of femininity has been changed by women and many times men appear more feminine than the women. For example, when an attempt was being made in the court room to disrobe Draupadī, all the males, including her husbands, appear passive, maintaining silence with their heads down. Draupadī on the other hand, in a single wrapped cloth, roars in anger that sends shivers down the spine of those transgressing the *dharma*. Draupadī’s anger continues throughout the narration. She tells lord Kṛṣṇa in agony about the weakness and passivity of her husbands when she was being dragged to the assembly in a single garment. When she was being insulted by the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the Kuru elders forgot her birth and upbringing and her relationship to them. She exclaims with pain that her own husbands could not protect her, “Bhīma’s bodily strength and Arjuna’s Gāṇḍīva were alike of no avail. Under such supreme provocation, even weaklings would have found strength and courage to strike the vile insulter dead. The Pāṇḍava-s are renowned heroes and yet Duryodhana lives!” (Rajgopalachari 122).

The *Mahābhārata* is a heroic epic, a narrative form in which men are supposed to be great warriors, full of masculinity and courage. However, reading the text from postmodern perspective of gender changes our concept of the text. The 'other' gender of Śikhaṇḍī and cross-dressing of Arjuna is a remarkable discourse of gender study. Ambā takes rebirth as Śikhaṇḍīni, the daughter of Drupada. She was born a female but she exchanged her sex with a *yakṣa* named Sthuna to become Śikhaṇḍī for taking revenge against Bhīṣma. Arjuna, on the other hand, learns dancing and singing while obtaining celestial weapons in Svargaloka. Later on, in the court of Virāṭa, he cross-dresses himself as a eunuch named Bṛhannalā and offers himself as a dance teacher for hiding his identity. As the postmodern theorists argue in the case of re-analysis of Elizabethan drama from the neo-historicist perspective, cross-dressing and trans-gender sexual behaviour are the most potent methods of questioning the gendered role mapping of characters. It aims to transgress the invisible boundaries that the age-old social taboos and norms have inflicted upon the socially constructed subject. It also interrogates the conventional terminology of gender and sex.

For the study of gender in the text, it would be better to analyse the term 'gender' and chart out the difference between 'gender' and 'sex' in general. Gender studies explore some basic questions like the meaning of being a man and a woman, the impact of gender binaries on the overall

identity and existence of human beings, and confined roles of being masculine and feminine. 'Gender' and 'sex' have often been taken as same categories but gender is a social construct while sex is a biological construct. Both are different and yet related to each other. Oakley defines it thus: "Sex is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible differences in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender' however, is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into 'masculine' and 'feminine'" (16). In gender studies, one studies the marginalised gender. The sexual difference between a man and a woman is nature's construction but the gender differences are constructed by the people themselves and this division of gendered role in society has become deeply rooted and is practiced as a religious duty from the very ancient to the present time.

In the contemporary Indian context, women have the facilities of voting, education, jobs, sports etc., but they are often marginalised and discriminated in society based on their sex and gender, sometimes by being raped and murdered and sometimes by being a life-long victim of domestic violence. Such women can take a cue from the characters depicted in the *Mahābhārata*. For example, Draupadī was exploited several times and trapped inside her feminine roles. The privileged princess Draupadī, with high respect and honour, chose Arjuna as her husband in her *svayaṁvara* but she was distributed among the five

Pāṇḍava-s like a commodity with nobody bothering to seek her consent. She was treated as an object or a thing of beauty and was distributed among five men equally. Furthermore, in the court of king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, a failed attempt was made to strip her in the assembly full of men of great respect. She was saved from the humiliation through divine intervention. However, Draupadī comes out strongly from all those humiliations. Her fury and grace combine to trigger a battle to uphold the supremacy of *dharma*.

The best example for understanding the gender construction and basic traits or nature of women as defined by men in the *Mahābhārata* appears in *Anuśāsana Parva*. Yudhiṣṭhira wishes to know from Bhīṣma about the disposition of women, how to understand and protect them given the fact that women are capable of making a lie appear as truth. He wants to know "whether women are truly capable of being restrained within the bonds prescribed by the scriptures or whether any one before our time did really succeed in so restraining them" (Ganguli, *Anuśāsana Parva*, Sec: XXXIX, 6-7). Bhīṣma explains that women should always be protected by men in every condition. He says that there are both types of women: virtuous and sinful. The virtuous women are highly blessed. They are the mothers of the universe for they cherish all creatures on the earth. They uphold the earth with endless love and care. The sinful ones are the destroyers of their races. Such women are wedded to sinful resolves.

Bhīṣma says that no one but a high-souled person is capable of protecting women. They are atrocious and devoted to passionate skills:

> They have non whom they love or like so much as they that have sexual congress with them. Women are like those (Atharvan) incantations that are destructive of life. Even after they are consented to live with one, they are prepared to abandon him for entering into engagements with others. Only one man, viz., Vipula, had succeeded in protecting woman. There is none else, O king, in the three worlds who is capable of protecting women. (Ganguli, *Anuśāsana Parva* Sec: XLIII, 16)

In the above quoted lines, Bhīṣma with a long explanation concludes that a woman cannot be protected or ruled by men. Only Vipula was able to do that and no other man is capable of doing this. Bhīṣma talks of women's gendered role (though the word gender has not been used, only indicated) as a necessity for preserving women's virtues and keeping them in control of cultural and social norms. Bhīṣma associates the goodness of a woman chiefly to her being a mother or wife of virtues, otherwise a woman can destroy the lives of men and the whole earth. The word 'protection' of women has been used in the sense 'to control' or to 'possess' a woman. C. Rajagopalachari writes in author's Preface to the *Mahābhārata* that women (in the text) are "highly honoured and entered largely in the lives

of their husbands and sons" (4). From the above quotes, it can be inferred that a woman is a goddess if she is a mother or wife of virtues or she is controlled and possessed by her husband or men in general. It may be inferred from the above quote that a woman has to adhere to roles specified to her by a society dominated by men. The female characters like Draupadī, Kuntī and Satyavatī question and transgress these very stereotypes in this epic. A postmodern reading of the text undercuts the subjectivisation of the 'feminine' and upholds the unbridled identity of the female characters.

In Indian mythology, women have been seen as an image of goodness, idol of sacrifice, full of devotion towards their husbands and children. The portrayal of women in the *Mahābhārata* is different because men and women in the text are not confined to play their gendered roles only. The above quoted lines also give the indication that a woman is capable of both creating and destroying the universe. Though men try to confine women within their roles of good wife and mothers, they fail to do so.

In this background, my thesis attempts to offer a deeper insight into the complex gender construction in the *Mahābhārata*. The study of gender under the rubric of postmodern and post-feminist theoretical postulates contributes in resolving the multiple and complex layers of gender construction in the text. The study works as a starting point for looking at

the relevance of the *Mahābhārata* in contemporary times very much like the great Greek and Latin classics are being reinvented by the Western critics in the last two decades. The Western academia is busy in reconstructing the classical past through the Greek and Latin classics. Therefore, it is equally relevant for the Indian academia to have a re-look at our classical knowledge texts with the modern critical tools that help us in getting a deeper insight and wider spectrum of interpretation of our classics.

The thesis comprises of five chapters in addition to the (first chapter) introduction and the (seventh chapter) Conclusion. It is relevant here to give a brief account of various issues and themes that have been taken up for detailed study in these chapters:

The second chapter titled **"Gender in Postmodernist Discourse: Theoretical Aspects"** looks at the theoretical framework of gender studies in the post-modernist critical theory. It is necessary to understand the fundamental concepts of postmodernism before embarking upon the case study of various characters in the epic using this theoretical framework. The chapter looks at various post-feminist postulates that have emerged in the past four decades in literary and cultural theory.

In this chapter, it will be shown how the focus has been to draw up small/local narratives of gendered roles as socio-cultural constructs that challenge and subvert the overarching established narratives rather

than building a grand narrative of feminist discourse. In other words, gender will be studied as a corollary of culture studies, which is crucial to the postmodernist approach to literature. The strength of postmodernism lies in the fact that it has allowed all the theoretical schools that aim to subvert the established and coercive ideological centres to function under the flexible rubric of culture studies.

The first critical viewpoint on postmodernism taken up for study will be that of Peter Barry. According to Barry, postmodernism proposes a celebration of fragmentalism and keeps a sceptical view towards everything. It claims that 'reality' is beyond the spheres of human understanding and those who claim to have access to the reality are actually displaying their politics of power. Peter Barry has explained that the prominence of fragmentation has been featured by the modernist "to register a deep nostalgia for an earlier age when faith was full and authority intact" (83). Postmodernism developed after the Second World War with a marked emphasis on fragmented forms, paradoxes, discontinuous narratives and a sceptical view towards the study of all literature. The Second World War brought vagueness towards the goodness of human beings. Science became a curse with the invention of weapons of mass destruction. The order of life, thinking and reasoning became untrue and then postmodernism took its birth.

Among the postmodernists, Jean Francosis Lyotard will be taken up for detailed study. Lyotard brought about the point of the rejection of grand or meta-narratives. According to his school of thought, all grand narratives should be viewed with scepticism because the truth presented in it is a constructed one under the influence of power and it needs to be deconstructed in order to get the 'real' truth.

The chapter will explore how the postmodern approach points out that construction of the binary terms of 'sex' and 'gender' is not the ultimate truth or reality but a politics of power. As the meaning of a sentence or a word should be determined by the reader and not by the author, the reality of cultural and social binaries should also be determined by the individuals through the construction of new identities. With the politics of 'identity' the postmodernists emphasise on empowering the minorities, women and homosexuals. Being a crucial area of study and research in the academic world, 'gender' study aims to understand femininity, masculinity, their necessity and impact on the overall behaviour of human beings. This discipline of study was initially established by activists mostly with the vision to achieve gender equality, later on the debate was raised that gender as a cultural construct has failed to establish a balanced life for both men and women and the 'other' gender.

The third chapter titled **"Draupadī and the Deconstruction of Gender Binaries"** is a detailed study of character of Draupadī and the way her aggressive and incisive approach is crucial for deconstructing the gender binaries inherent in the text. 'Gender' as a socio-cultural construct and a site of contest can be analyzed through various interpretations of the character of Draupadī in *Mahābhārata* and the events narrated therein. Draupadī is a rare combination of both unique beauty and brain. She is one of the most powerful women ever created in the history of world literature. She stands apart with her matchless beauty, her logical arguments, her revengeful attitude, and her anger that can burn the world. Draupadī has no match not only in Indian literature but also in the western literature. She is in fact just opposite of Shakespeare's great tragic heroine Desdemona who was killed due to her silence and her inability to present her side of argument before her husband. Draupadī has a matchless beauty but she is not innocent, ignorant, and voiceless. In Greek mythology, Helen was the most beautiful woman in the world and the great Trojan War was fought for her possession. In Indian mythology, Draupadī is considered the most beautiful woman in the world and the great Mahābhārata War was fought for taking revenge from the Kaurava-s who had insulted Draupadī. The 'self' or self-respect mean everything for Draupadī and there is nothing wrong in this attitude. She raises her voice every time she is treated just as a weak feminine body.

There are various theories which justify polyandry in the Hindu knowledge texts and Draupadī seems to have abided by the existing justification. Born of sacrificial fire, Draupadī has the divine gift of restoring her virginity after consummating her marriage with every brother. There is another way of looking at Draupadī's acceptance of polyandry. It is a rejection of the accepted conventions of one woman marrying a man and devoting her life for that man. It is a rejection of the gendered role of a wife to remain at the periphery and allow the man take the centre stage. Like an atom with the male nucleus and female electrons revolving on the periphery, Draupadī by this act of polyandry inverses the whole social atomic structure by becoming the nucleus and pushing the five males on the outer orbit. This reversal of role is Draupadī's first silent step towards realignment of gendered space in Hastināpur.

The fourth chapter titled **"Dynamics of Motherhood: Place of Satyavatī, Kuntī and Gāndhārī in the *Mahābhārata*"** looks at the role of mothers (married, unmarried and widows) in giving shape to the narrative of the *Mahābhārata*. It is a myth that widows in India have no agency and they are marginalised. In fact, motherhood and widowhood grant more powerful and responsible position to the women in the text. After becoming a widow, a woman has to play the dual role of a father and a mother. The widows occupy a pivotal position in the family. In the

Mahābhārata, two very powerful and influential widows are Satyavatī and Kuntī.

Satyavatī, daughter of a fisherman, married outside her community and became the queen of the most powerful empire in India. She not only became the queen but also governed the politics of Hastināpur for a long time. Satyavatī gets the agency and governing authority through the strength of her character. She does not give the impression of any typical feminine traits such as being passive, voiceless, venerable, or self-sacrificing, as she uses both her mind and her feminine body for creating her space, power, and identity.

Kuntī, Satyavatī's grand-daughter-in-law, is a remarkable study in womanhood. In her maidenhood, she served the fiery sage Durvāsā, who rewarded her with a boon in the form of a *mantra*. He proclaimed, "thou shall be able to summon (to thy side) whatever celestials thou likest. And, by their grace, shall thou also obtain children" (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva*, Section LXVII, 144- 145). The curious Kuntī (Pṛthā) summoned the god Arka (Sun), who appeared before her immediately. Kuntī tried her best to convince the Sun god that she had only tested the potency of the *mantra*, but the Sun god did not agree to return without granting her a child. From this union was born a son known all over the world as Karṇa, laced with natural armour and earrings. Fearful of her social standing, Kuntī disposed

the child by floating him in the river Gangā and kept her chastity intact to the world.

Kuntī's political foresight perceived that any split among her five sons would frustrate the goal of mastering Hastināpur. Kuntī knew that the only way to forge an unbreakable link among the five was not to allow them to get engrossed in different wives. So long their lives had been governed by her and had revolved only around her. She could be replaced only by a single woman, not five, if that unified focus were to persist. Hence she ensured that Draupadī was married to all the five brothers.

Gāndhārī invariably appears in the *Mahābhārata* as a strong-willed and determined woman. When we first see her as the young bride of blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra, she puts a blindfold over her eyes. Traditional interpretation says she blindfolded herself out of devotion to her husband - to deny herself the pleasures that were denied to him. If the world of sight did not exist for her husband, then she did not want it for herself either. However, many modern writers see it as an act of revolt by a woman who was betrayed rather than as one of self-denial.

As a strong critic of the war, as a witness to Sanjay's account of events on the battlefield, and as the one who issues a curse against Kṛṣṇa contributing to his death and the destruction of the Vṛṣṇī clan, Gāndhārī is one of the most prominent female characters in the *Mahābhārata*. During her years as queen in the Kaurava court, she opposes many tragic

events that lead to the fateful encounter at Kurukshetra. In particular, she attends the weapon's display, the first public contest between her sons and the Pāṇḍava-s; she witnesses the dicing match and the disrobing of Draupadī; and she monitors a number of attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement described in the *Udyogaparva*. Although she remains silent during most of these scenes – with her presence only occasionally mentioned – she does speak up on a number of occasions, trying to persuade her son Duryodhana not to go to war, and criticizes her husband for not standing against their son. Her attempts to avert the war are of no avail, yet her ability to intervene effectively is illustrated.

The fifth chapter titled **"The 'Other' Gender in the *Mahābhārata*: A Study of Arjuna/Bṛhannalā and Ambā /Śikhaṇḍī"** is an attempt at analysing the 'other' gender in the *Mahābhārata* with a focus on the characters of Arjuna/Bṛhannalā and Ambā /Śikhaṇḍī. The exact nature of Arjuna's gender as Bṛhannalā during the Pāṇḍava's year of disguise is not exactly clear as the text gives no evidence whether Arjuna is simply cross-dressing or has simply lost his masculinity owing to the curse by Urvaśī. At start of their year in hiding, Arjuna went to the court of Virāṭa and offered himself as a dance teacher for the royal princess. When Virāṭa ordered Arjuna's inspection to ensure that he was safe to be put in the princess's quarters, the answer came that Arjuna's non-masculinity was firm. The king of the Matsya-s then tested Bṛhannalā in dancing, music, and other

fine arts. Bṛhannalā was granted permission to instruct Virāṭa's daughter in dancing and there the mighty Arjuna began giving lessons in singing and instrumental music to the daughter of Virāṭa.

The symbolism behind Arjuna's disguise has been analyzed from various viewpoints by critics. Alf Hiltebeitel questions whether this is a manifestation of a weakness in a staunchly patriarchal culture, a subtle subversion of it, or a testament to its subtlety and elasticity. What can this crossing of genders in the hero of the story mean? Hiltebeitel argues that Arjuna's transsexual disguise is a "clear evocation" of the androgynous Śiva (153), which might support the idea that in the *Mahābhārata* genders may cross as much as the realms of human and divine. Arjuna's human body can be transformed into a divine one through wrestling with Śiva, his masculine body may also be transformed into a feminine or androgynous one through identification with this god-who-is-half-woman (149).

The significance of Arjuna's transsexuality becomes dual, as he is intimately linked with both Kṛṣṇa as well as Śiva. The picture becomes even more complex when we realize that "Kṛṣṇa himself is by no means univocally masculine! We see him throughout the Purāṇa-s (though not in the *Mahābhārata*) as Viṣṇu in the persona of Mohīnī, the enchantress" (Custodi 213). To return to Arjuna's disguise as Bṛhannalā, there is a continuing ambiguity about her role. At one point of time, in the battlefield, he tells Uttara that he is not a eunuch and that he is just

standing by his elder brother's words by maintaining abstinence. Nevertheless, whatever the exact nature of Arjuna's disguise, and however he might insist on his masculinity, Arjuna's non-masculinity is nonetheless firm enough for him to be allowed into the princess's quarters.

The second character that deserves analysis is Ambā/ Śikhaṇḍī whose story spans two lives in *Mahābhārata*. As Devdutt Pattanaik observes, Śikhaṇḍīni, who became Śikhaṇḍī, is what modern queer vocabulary would call "a female-to-male transsexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally. But she is portrayed either as a eunuch (castrated male), a male-to-female trans-sexual (a man who rejects his male biology), a male-to-female transgender (a man who wears women's clothes as he feels like a woman), an intersexed hermaphrodite, or simply a man who was a woman (Ambā) in his past life" (28).

The sixth chapter is titled "**Gender in Modern Renditions/Interpretations of the *Mahābhārata***." Modern Indian writers have exploited the multiple possibilities for different lives of the Indian epic heroes and heroines continually. As postulated by Alf Hiltebeitel, this has led to an unfolding of new epic-based plots in classical Indian drama and later fiction, in vernacular versions of the epics and vernacular regional oral epics where the heroes and heroines of the classical epics work out their unfinished business (147). *Mahābhārata* re-tellings are at once a re-creation and re-interpretation of the epic from a realistic

perspective. In all these renditions of the epic texts, the authors choose episodes of their liking in order to foreground the characters and incidents in their own storyline. These writers deviate from the actual storyline of the text to make their characters appear worldlier. The storyline is redefined and reconstructed to give essential prominence to the characters they are dealing with.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Palace of Illusions* (2010), based upon the *Mahābhārata*, is a wonderful work of fiction having multiple formal and structural levels. With the complex construction of femininity presented in the *Mahābhārata*, Chitra Banerjee constructs her novel by putting the issues of gender and identity in contemporary perspective. She retells the epic from Draupadī's point of view.

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (2013) brings to focus the feminine woes and worries of Draupadī, who is caught in the unusual situation of wedding five brothers simultaneously. Pratibha Ray gives her own interpretation to the image of the suffering Draupadī by bringing into focus the inner qualities that make her character special.

Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1987) has a tribal woman in the lead role who is involved in the naxalite movement in Sharkhani forest. The story narrates how politics works in a society and the way women are forced to accept the tyranny of the powerful. The

travails of a tribal woman living amongst a group of naxalites are beautifully depicted by Mahasweta Devi.

The Stone Women (2000), a collection of short stories by Shashi Deshpande aims to create awareness in both men and women towards the gendered roles that they are religiously following. As the very title of the book suggests, the central position has been given to women in all the stories. The women characters in the stories are mythological, taken mostly from the *Mahābhārata*. The feminine selves of the mythological women have been seen through the eyes of a feminist narrator of the story.

The first story "The Stone Women" sets the tone for the other stories to follow. "The Inner Room" is the story of Ambā. The story highlights the transformation of a feminine Ambā into a feminist who questions the patriarchal system and rejects her life under the dominance of men. In the same way "And What has been Decided?" is another story based on Draupadī. There are stories based on Kuntī, Gāndhārī, etc., and in every story the author highlights the journey of a feminine woman into a feminist.

Five Lords, Yet None a Protector (2005) and *Timeless Tales* (2006) are two plays based on the *Mahābhārata* by Saoli Mitra. Saoli has chosen some of the important episodes of the *Mahābhārata* related to some major characters. With her multiple talents she makes the characters alive before

the audience and the readers. Both plays are performed by a single young woman (Saoli Mitra) who narrates the story and plays different roles while adding her own comments. The plays are appealing to the audience as a single voice of the performer, who narrates the poignant tales of women from the *Mahābhārata*, goes straight into the heart of the audience. These plays were originally written in Bengali titled *Nathaboti Anathaboth* and *Katha Amritasaman* and translated into English as *Five lords, Yet None a Protector* and *Timeless Tales* by Ipshita Chanda, Rita Datta and Moushumi Bhowmik.

Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You (2014) by Devdutt Pattanaik is a collection of the queer stories from Indian mythologies. The book provides the Indian perspective of queerness before the Indian and the Western readers. Pattanaik has explained the Indian concept of queerness to his readers. The book comprises 30 stories out of which some have been taken from the *Mahābhārata*. The *Mahābhārata* based stories are: "Shikhandi, who became a man to satisfy her wife", "Mandhata, whose mother was a man", "Bhangashvana, who was a mother, and a man", "Skanda, whose mothers were not all women", "Arjuna, who was temporarily castrated for showing restraint", "Bhima, who wore women's clothes to punish", and "Samba, who wore women's clothes as a prank." The very title of all the mentioned stories suggests the presence of unusual circumstances and creates curiosity to explore the stories. In these stories,

queerness appears to be an acceptable part of life. The title of the book has been taken from one of the characters of the *Mahābhārata*, Śikhaṇḍī who changes her sex from a woman into a man.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a satirical/historical novel. The name of the book is a reference to the *Mahābhārata* (literally – "Great India") by Veda Vyāsa. *The Great Indian Novel* is a powerful rendition of the politics during the Indian Independence movement. Tharoor recasts the major characters of the *Mahābhārata* in the contemporary setup and the result is an irreverent historical narrative that is identical yet almost unrecognizable from both the history of schoolbooks and the mythical story of ages past.

The seventh chapter or the **Conclusion** sums up the entire critical hypothesis built across this thesis. In the conclusion, I have given a final shape to the postmodern approach towards the study of gender in the *Mahābhārata*. The cultural construction of femininity as being passive, voiceless, vulnerable, and sweet natured has been proved to be untrue in the study of gender in the *Mahābhārata.* Thus, the thesis comes to a logical conclusion.

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Chapter 2

Gender in Postmodernist Discourse: Theoretical Aspects

In the last three decades, gender studies have focussed primarily on how societies have determined and managed sex categories, the cultural meanings attached to the roles assigned to those categories and how individuals have understood/reacted to the identities thrust upon them across time and space. Rather than building a grand narrative of feminist discourse, the focus has been to draw up small/local narratives of gendered roles as socio-cultural constructs that challenge and subvert the overarching established narratives. In other words, gender studies have been naturally intertwined with culture studies, which is crucial to the postmodernist approach to literature. The essential aspect of postmodernism is to incorporate within a broad rubric of cultural studies all schools of thought that subvert the powerful coercive ideological apparatus.

Postmodern theory evolved as an atheistic and anti-realistic system of belief in opposition to the existing concept of Modernism. Postmodernism expands the area covered by modernism by its insistence upon the relevance of fragmentalism and a compulsory scepticism. According to Peter Barry, postmodernism emphasizes that 'reality' is beyond the spheres of human understanding and those who claim to have

access to the reality are actually displaying their politics of power. He further explains, “The prominence of fragmentation has been featured by the modernist to register a deep nostalgia for earlier age when faith was full and authority intact” (83). Peter Barry goes on to argue that fragmentation for the postmodernists “is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of belief. In a word, the modernist laments fragmentation while the postmodernist celebrates it” (84).

The Second World War marked a paradigm shift in social consciousness with an emphasis on fragmented forms, paradoxes, discontinuous narratives and a sceptical view towards the study of anything. The war brought vagueness towards the goodness of human beings. Science became a curse with inventions of weapons and atom bombs that lead to mass destruction. The order of life, thinking and reasoning became untrue. In this phase of ‘unreal’consciousness, postmodernism evolved into an all pervasive school of thought.

Among the postmodernists, Jean Francosis Lyotard brought about the point of the rejection of grand or meta-narratives. According to his school of thought, all grand narratives should be viewed with scepticism because the truth presented in it is a constructed one under the influence of power and it needs to be deconstructed in order to get the ‘real’ truth. Lyotard’s views are echoed by Shaun Best in his book *A Beginner's Guide to Social Theory* (2003), “ Truth, in Nietzsche's view, was nothing more

than a mobile host of metaphors and illusions, and in the last analysis the 'will to truth' is a manifestation of 'the will to power'. In other words, for Nietzsche, truth like everything else is a function of power" (213).

American author Wayne Gabardi in his book *Negotiating Postmodernism* (2001) has presented an elaborate study of the postmodernism in its early phase of development. The works of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jeah Francisco Leotard, and Michael Foucault, describe the initial radical phase of postmodernism. Their works clearly revealed that postmodernism had levelled an incursion on the basic grounds of modernity:

> It rejected the enlightenment belief in the unity of reason and progress, the idea that there is a rational purpose or theology to history. It also rejected the notion that individual is a free and rational agent capable of self-conscious reflection, that science and technology can rationally control and develop the natural and social worlds, and that liberty, equality and democracy rest upon universal humanistic foundation. (5)

It is but obvious that postmodernism was not just an advancement of pre-existing modernist notions of truth, reality, knowledge, power and

rationality. It was reactionary in nature and it aimed at overturning those very notions of knowledge from which it emerged.

In his book *Communication Studies* (2006), Sky Marsen observes about the postmodernist attitudes towards the nature of knowledge:

> Postmodernism designates a set of attitudes towards the nature of knowledge – how we know things and how what we know is influenced by what we believe. It is mainly based on the idea that the world does not function according to rational laws and that the most challenging of human issues are beyond the grasp of scientific approaches. For postmodern writers, identity is not fixed, and ethical concepts, as well as the notion of truth itself, are not absolute but relative to circumstances and cultural values. (29)

The postmodern approach also points out that construction of the binary terms of 'sex' and 'gender' is not the ultimate truth or reality but a politics of power. As the meaning of a sentence or a word should be determined by the reader and not by the author, the reality of cultural and social binaries should also be determined by the individuals through the construction of new identities. With the politics of 'identity', the postmodernists emphasise on empowering the minorities, women, and homosexuals.

Being a crucial area of study and research in the academic world, 'gender' study aims to understand femininity, masculinity, their necessity, and their impact on the overall behaviour of human beings. This discipline of study was initially established by activists mostly with the vision to achieve gender equality, later on the debate was raised that gender as a cultural construct has failed in order to establish a balanced life for both men and women and the 'other' gender. Postmodern study of gender provides a sceptical view and gives a deeper understanding while interrogating the different fronts of gender and its relation with culture, individuals and reality.

Furthermore, gender study is the study of the power structure and power distributions in the society that works just like other categories: sexuality, race, class, religion and nationality. These terms are constructed in order to create a system or a structure of power in the society. Power is distributed on the basis of one's sexuality, gender, race, class, religion, and nationality. Gender study explores the deep pores of any cultural system and questions the binaries of masculinities and femininities. Gender study has often been misunderstood as a study of women, whereas it explores men, women, and the 'other' gender. It also explores the lives of people who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. The area of gender study is therefore vast and even after knowing each and every minute aspect related to it one ultimately fails to come with a solution or a

conclusion. To understand a culture or a society it is crucial to understand gender as it makes a tremendous impact in one's daily life and behaviour.

'Gender' and 'sex' are related terms as one's sexual identity is given with one's birth and then the sexual identity determines one's gender identity. Being divided into a male or a female or neither being the two are decided by one's physical construction and this physical difference is called 'sex' and then this 'sex' gives birth to 'gender' and then gradually one realises oneself under discriminating power structures. It is not a universal truth that women are always marginalised as men can also be marginalised despite being masculine. Femininity and masculinity are both associated with the physicality of self. As femininity has always been symbolised as something fragile, delicate and weak, etc., masculinity symbolises strength, hardness and activeness, etc. The gender categories of masculinity and femininity undermine one's humanity, the 'human identity' falls down under the layers of these terms. All these binaries or restrictions or rules have nothing to do with the human 'soul' as they are related to the physical body of human beings and 'power' is also related to the physicality of self. The power is thus related to one's body and so is gender and sex.

In the 21st century, inspite of gender equality gaining primacy across the globe, body has become more important. There are men who still treat women as their property because of physical weakness of

women. The domestic violence, rape cases inside home, outside home or in different offices with working women indicate the mindset of men who only see women through their body. Therefore, the question is raised against the existence of the categories like sex and gender, which create huge gap between men and women. The postmodern take on gender does not aim to achieve gender equality. It rather interrogates the existence and the truth of gender on the physical plane. As a text, the *Mahābhārata* does the same to a great extent.

The *Mahābhārata* is a text with a challenging attitude towards the cultural and social binaries. The women in the text with all their femininity enjoy respectful positions. The episodes of cross-dressing, change (or loss) of sex and gender, masculine with feminine traits, feminine with masculine traits, breaking and gaining of one's virginity, becoming mother by other ways than by the husbands, all these incidents in the text indicate fluidity of the cultural and social binaries. The reading of gender in the text provides a platform to place it in the present world of postmodernisation and globalisation.

Considering 'sex' as a biological category and authenticating its existence directly provides 'gender' a green signal to be more established or make it more firm and unquestionable. The gender studies emerged around 1980s and the first area of discussion was how to make a clear division between gender and sex. Michel Foucault in his work *The History*

of Sexuality (1979) has empathically challenged the understanding of 'sex' as a biological fact, arguing that sex cannot be simply understood as a biological category; rather it should also be studied as a social practice. The book analyses sexuality with different perspectives and establishes it as a cultural category like gender. David Glover and Cora Kaplan in the "Introduction" to the book *Genders* (2000) explain the relation between gender and sex and ultimately conclude:

> Sex and gender are therefore intimately related, but not because one is 'natural' while the other represents its transformation into 'culture'. Rather, both are inescapably cultural categories that refer to ways of describing and understanding human bodies and human relationships, our relationships to ourselves and to others. Sex and gender necessarily overlap, sometimes confusingly so. (17)

David Glover and Cora Kaplan have further expounded on the worldwide use of the word 'gender' taken as "one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning" (10).

These explanations complicate the initial understanding of gender and sex in which sex is supposed to be natural and gender is supposed to be culture specific, sex indicating biological identity and gender social and

cultural identity. The simple logic indicates that if one authenticates 'sex' by considering it a biological difference between a man and a woman, one authenticates gender as well. Postmodernism puts both 'sex' and 'gender' under culturally constructed categories and provides new insights to create one's identity out of such categories. Kate Millet has argued in her work *The Sexual Politics* (1972) that gender distinctions lead to a set of different rules for men and women and this difference created with different rules is the cultural difference: "Male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different" (31). Gayle Rubin in an article, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex" (1996) has also acknowledged sex as natural and gender as biological or cultural system: "The set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (106). The overall conclusion seems to be that gender and sexual difference between a man and a woman are socio-cultural. The basic point is that gender and sex are related terms and accepting sex as a natural difference between a man and a woman will ultimately create gender binaries.

It has already been discussed that these terms have been created to establish a structural power system and those who were in the centre were enjoying powerful positions. They never questioned this power structure.

Those who fell on the margin never had courage to fight and they accepted the binaries as universal and natural construction of life.

Judith Butler, one of the most influential scholars in theorizing gender and studying it from postmodern perspectives, explained how the theorists who tried to seek the very root of women's operations ultimately legitimized, naturalized and universalized the subordination of women through prehistoric narration in the context of West. The prehistoric narratives and the mythological texts have played a great role in authenticating the sex and gender identities. Christine Delphy in the work, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women's Oppression* (1984) claims that the authentication of the sex and gender identities "is based on the "primordial male provider" myth that suggests all women were more or less incapacitated by motherhood forcing them to rely on the support of men. This version of pre-history is then used to 'explain' the evolution of our present system" (8). The chief concern of both Delphy and Butler's work is to understand the need to question the presupposed and accepted roles of gender and sex or to rethink and restudy it completely. On the other hand, S. Jackson and J. Jones in an article "Thinking for Ourselves: An Introduction to Feminist Theorising" (1998) suggest that feminist theory is a means of counteracting male subjectivity in the realm of knowledge: "It is about thinking for ourselves – women generating knowledge about women and gender for women" (1). Jackson and Jones

thus have explained that the feminists tried to reduce or naturalise the force of male dominance.

Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble* (1999) explains gender as a product of a repetitive, regular speech, behaviour and performance. There cannot be a fixed definition of gender according to Butler. She explores on the construction and fluidity of gender identity:

> Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. 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. (179)

Butler here explains that gender identity is not a stable identity. It is rather provisional and it exists on its repetitive and habitual performance. One cannot choose to be masculine or feminine as it is not a matter of choice. However, gender identity changes constantly and one cannot have control over it. Gender identities differ with cultural, social and political differences.

Jane Flax, a philosopher, therapist, feminist and a political scientist, in her work *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (1990), explains: "Gender is a natural or pre-social fact. It rather results from social conditions, which are rapidly changing, male dominance, equation of sex and gender (sex being the anatomical differences between male and female)" (*Thinking Fragments* 22). In an article titled "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" (1990), Flax describes gender relation as differentiated: "Through gender relations two types of persons are created: man and woman. Man and woman are posited as exclusionary categories. One can be only one gender, never the other or both" ("Postmodernism and Gender" 45). Jane Flax further explains that postmodern discourses are all "deconstructive" in that they seek to distance us from and make us sceptical about beliefs concerning truth, knowledge, power, the self, and language. Judith Butler, on the other hand, expresses in *Gender Trouble* her concern towards the feminist take on gender and criticizes the pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory, "I sought to counter those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity" (3).

By separating and grouping women as a marginalised and oppressed category, feminists have further emphasized the gender binaries. Butler further explains her view:

> Any feminist theory that restricts the meaning of gender in the presuppositions of its own practice sets up exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences. It seemed to me, and continues to seem, that feminism ought to be careful not to idealize certain expressions of gender that, in turn, produce new forms of hierarchy and exclusion. (3)

She argues that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender because identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results (25).

Gender has also been an area of interrogation for the psychoanalytic theoreticians like Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Bracha Ettinger and Mark Blechner. Gender has been studied differently by these theoreticians. For instance, the Freudian concept of gender is quite controversial and opposed by the feminists as he stated that women's lack of a penis is a fact and they should better accept this biological difference. Lacan, on the other hand, made a study of the understanding of gender in men and women on various unconscious levels and he explained that the sexual situation of men and women depends on

their gender identity as they are sexed as male and female by birth. Julia Kristeva has made a semiotic study of gender and patriarchal cultures. Mark Blechner explored the concept of sex and gender on different levels psychoanalytically. Therefore, one can notice how everyone has different ways of looking into the discourse of gender but neither of them could provide solutions to the ground problems of gender identity and gender binaries.

Whether the feminist theory and other recent theories help us in understanding the meaning of gender or complicate its meaning, is a controversial issue to discuss. The take of feminist theoreticians on gender differs from the viewpoint of post-feminist critics. In the context of Indian women, one has to take a different method of analysis because women are traditionally considered an equal other half of men.

The post-feminists oppose any binary term like masculine or feminine as they argue that such binary terms create further complication as believing in any of them strengthens the roots of gender. Postmodernism brought about major changes in the study of gender. Gender as a term, concept or a movement turned into a theory of identity that talked mostly of the construction of fluid or multiple identities in order to break the fixed gender identity.

With the achievement of the right to vote and the women's liberation movement of the 1960 and 1970s, the feminists undertook a

mission to revise and interrogate the accepted version of history. The attributes of men and women were studied separately and later on men, too, started to look at masculinity in the same way as women looked at femininity. After having a separate interrogation of masculinity and femininity, there appeared a need to study sexuality in the late 1980s and 1990s. Sexuality and gender were not seen as separate entities. Gender study expanded in area and scope and it became a subject of cultural and social study. It included queer theory and sexuality in it. With the expansion of sexuality studies in gender theory, it also included masculinity studies. Both the feminists and gender studies scholars emphasised particularly that the gendered and sexual identities do not appear in a vacuum, as they are internally associated with social institutions and practices.

Disputation between the Second Wave Feminists and Postmodernists started with the expanded area of study in gender. The feminists opposed the arguments of queer theorists and postmodernists that everything is fragmented and thus there can be no grand narrative and no categories. Feminists argued that explaining the fact that gender is culturally or socially constructed does not discard the fact there are different levels of oppression between genders.

It is important to understand the difference between the postmodern perspective of gender and the feminists' take on gender. Chrys

Ingraham in the article, “The Heterosexual Imaginary: Feminist Sociology and Theories of Gender” (1997), explains the shortsightedness of the feminist ideology which appears to come to a compromising position with losing its conceptual and political edge from the concept of gender. There is no doubt that the feminists had fought a long battle to usher in a transformed society with gender equality. Ingraham, however, appeals to the feminists to re-evaluate their concept of heterosexuality:

> But in the 20 years since feminists announced the need for sociology to attend to gender as an organizing social category, gender studies have been gradually canonized; more than that, the founding concept, gender, has come to be taken as obvious. From text books to research studies to theory there is little or no debate over what is meant by gender. Thus the feminist sociological understanding of gender need to be re-examined for the ways in which they participate in the reproduction of what I call “the heterosexual imaginary.” (2)

Ingraham explains the meaning of ‘the heterosexual imaginary’ as a process of thinking which hides the presence of heterosexuality in conceptualising gender and prevents any critical analysis of heterosexuality. Ingraham further argues that the material conditions of capitalist patriarchal societies are responsible for institutionalising

heterosexuality and associating it directly with gender and by doing this, they are rearticulating some of the critical strategies of early feminist sociology within a materialist feminist framework. She feels that it is possible to both redress and disrupt the heterosexual imaginary circulating in contemporary gender theory: "Gender, or what I would call "hetero-genders," is the asymmetrical stratification of the sexes in relation to the historical varying institutions of patriarchal heterosexuality" (3).

The culturally and socially constructed terms 'hetero-sexuality' and 'hetero-gender' are the binaries that are open to change. Sandy Stone, a postmodern trans-sexual theorist has investigated outside the binaries of sex, gender and sexuality in her article "The Empire Strikes Back: A Post-transsexual Manifesto" (1991). Stone has given the term 'Postranssexualism', which refers to the women's coming out of sexual binaries and becoming rather ambiguous. Like Butler, she also appeals to reject the rigid binaries of 'sex' and 'gender' and prefer ambiguity.

On the other hand S. Jackson in his article "Theorising Gender and Sexuality" (1998) explains that materialist and postmodern feminists both dismiss the argument that femininity and masculinity emanate from "some 'natural', 'pre-social biological essence'. 'Women' and 'men' are social groups that are defined in relation to each other and cannot exist without the opposing category" (135). Judith Butler writes on similar lines in her book *Gender Trouble*, "the masculine subject's existence is radically

dependent on the female 'Other', exposing his autonomy as illusory" (vii). Butler has thus explained that there cannot be a separate formulation of gender and sex. Butler has explained that gender identity of a man and a women is a result of repetitive and regular performance of their gendered roles.

Simon Brodbeck and Brain Black explain in the "Introduction" to the book *Gender and Narrative in the Mahābhārata* (2007) on the same line: "*Mahābhārata* is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous telling and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since" (10-11). Studying gender as a concept in which the gender identity is always fluid and conditional, one can open up a number of fruitful avenues of exploration into the *Mahābhārata*. Simon Brodbeck and Brain Black have emphasized upon gender as one of the most central and most contested issues in the text. Discussions regarding gender operate on a number of different levels and are "manifested in multiple ways without the text providing one consistent and definitive view" (10). They further explain that the *Mahābhārata* is the best example in which the gender identity is not stable:

> As such, gender is not a fixed or isolated aspect of one's identity, but intersects and interacts in complex ways with one's class, race, education, religion, family, etc., and with

> the exigencies of particular situations. Similarly, a number of characters in the *Mahābhārata*, notably Yudhiṣṭhira, Arjuna, and Draupadī, manifest different modes of gendered behaviour at different moments in the narrative. (20-21)

In the text, some important characters shift the gender binaries of masculinity and femininity. For example, Arjuna's gender identity changes with situation and need. Being the most masculine man, a lover and a bull in the battlefield he spends one year of his life as an effeminate. Living one year fully without his masculine self, Arjuna breaks from his masculine identity and soon after one year he again comes to his masculine form. On the other hand, Draupadī also breaks the royal feminine role of her gender by constructing her new identity. Her personality possesses some prominent traits of being active, revengeful, argumentative, and outspoken, a treasure of wisdom and display of anger that can burn the world. These are not feminine traits in any way.

The epic form of the *Mahābhārata* allows various identities and different facets of one's personality. It becomes a fertile ground to understand gender structure of the ancient time, which appears conditional, fluid, and constantly shifting from one situation or circumstance to another. The gendered and sexual binaries at times appear as a thin invisible line. There are instances of transsexualism in

which a man changes his sex with a woman and a woman with a man. It does not sound logical that the change of sex was possible without any medical or operational process in the ancient time. Śikhaṇḍī in the *Mahābhārata* is a prominent example of transsexuality, if one may call it so. As the daughter of Drupada, Śikhaṇḍīni changes her sex with a man in order to take her revenge from Bhīṣma. “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 & Black 19).

Andrea Custodi in the article “Show you are a Man: Trans-sexuality and gender bending in the characters of Arjuna/Brihannala and Amba/Shikhandi” (2007) has explored the *Mahābhārata* as an example to study the presence of the concept of the third sex in ancient India. The study of the concept of sexuality and gender might appear fluid among deities and in mythologies but when one talks of *dharma* and the living of life following the norms of *dharma* it confines humankinds strictly to the two genders that are clearly distinct. Custodi observes that the *Mahābhārata* has a lack of clear distinction between the sexes and has inauspicious resonances – for example, women seemed to behave and look like men and men like women and gender ambiguity or reversal is used broadly throughout the epic as a sign of dharmic decline.

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Chapter 3

Draupadī and the Deconstruction of Gender Binaries

Ahalyā Draupadī Kuntī Tārā Mandodarī tathā/

pañcakanyāh smaretannityam mahāpātakanaśam//

(Ahalyā, Draupadī, Kuntī, Tārā and Mandodarī-

Remembering ever the virgins five destroy the greatest sins.)

(Bhattacharya 13)

The above traditional Sanskrit exhortation quoted in Pradip Bhattacharya's article "Panchakanya: Women of Substance" is a perfect starting point to study Draupadī from a postmodern post-feminist perspective of gender. All of the five ladies mentioned above broke the conventions assigned sacred by the society and religion, yet they are revered. More often than not, Draupadī and Kuntī have been at the wrong end of social conventions. Yet their perspective on the turn of events in the great epic has been a topic of debate in literary and non-literary circles. 'Gender' as a socio-cultural construct and a site of contest can be analyzed through various interpretations of the character of Draupadī in *Mahābhārata* and the events narrated therein. The episodes related to

Draupadī will be analyzed and meanings will be formulated out of the representations of 'gender' in the *Mahābhārata* in this chapter.

Draupadī is a rare combination of unique beauty and brain. She never forgets or forgives anyone who hurts her self-respect. She is one of the most powerful women ever created in the history of world literature. Born with her flaming beauty, Draupadī stands apart with her logical arguments, her revengeful attitude, and her anger that can burn the world. Andrea Custodi writes, "On the one hand Draupadī has been extolled as the perfect wife – chaste, demure, and devoted to her husbands, but on the other hand she is often shown to be intellectual, assertive, and sometimes downright dangerous" (213). Fritz Blackwell terms Draupadī as the major figure of the *Mahābhārata*: "If one single major figure can be singled out from that encyclopaedic epic; at any rate, someone has remarked that no Draupadī, no *Mahābhārata*" (139).

Unlike Sītā of the *Rāmāyaṇa,* Draupadī is not sacrificing and selfless. Iravati Karve has made an excellent comparison between the woman characters of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. She argues that the *Mahābhārata* women are more powerful and vibrant than the women in the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Sītā and Draupadī are, in many ways, similar - both were daughters of the earth, brought up as royal princesses, both married to the finest archers of the time in their *svayaṁvara*, both were exiled and they suffered comprehensibly. Yet they are very much different. Sītā spent most

of her 14 years in exile in the company of her husband in a peaceful atmosphere before the advent of Rāvaṇa. Draupadī's years in the forest were years of shame and humiliation. Karve admires Draupadī, who clenched her fists and cursed, and who burnt with anger and sought revenge. She does not mince words, even going to the extent of calling her husbands castrates (*napuṁsaka*). Draupadī's *svayaṁvara* is also not as simple as that of Sītā. While Sītā, like an ideal bride, remains silent during her *svayaṁvara,* Draupadī speaks loudly to reject Karṇa, a warrior of low birth.

Draupadī speaks fearlessly whenever it is required and possesses the rare ability to convince others with her arguments. In case of Sītā's *svayaṁvara*, Śrī Rāma was the only contender who was able to fulfil the aim, but Draupadī selected one from two great archers. Sītā is known for her sacrificing self whereas Draupadī is a personification of Śaktī who can sacrifice things but not at the cost of her self-respect. Although, Draupadī is one of the most feminine women in the text, she is intelligent, knowledgeable, communicative and active.

Draupadī is, therefore, matchless both in Indian and Western literature. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, she is antithetical to Shakespeare's great tragic heroine Desdemona, who was killed by her husband due to her silence and her inability to present her innocence before him. 'Self' is important for Draupadī and there is nothing wrong in

this attitude. She raises her voice every time she is treated under the cultural construct of femininity. Draupadī was born with the aim to re-establish the faith in justice; her life is full of struggle. R. K. Narayan has aptly summarized the importance of her character in the epic: "The Kaurava-s are evil incarnate; powerful, clever, and accomplished. For the good of humankind, they must be wiped out, and Draupadī will play a great role in it" (52).

Before doing an elaborate study of gender construction in different episodes centring on Draupadī, her mesmerising feminine beauty needs some mention. In *Sabhā Parva* (Ganguli's translation of the *Mahābhārata*), Yudhiṣṭhira, before putting Draupadī at stake like a priceless object, describes her unique beauty. He says that she is neither short nor tall. She is neither spare nor corpulent. She is possessed of blue curly locks and her eyes are fragrant as the autumn lotus. Yudhiṣṭhira further emphasises that Draupadī possesses every accomplishment and with her compassionate and sweet-speech, she is the perfect woman to have as a wife. Yudhiṣṭhira goes on explaining Draupadī's physical beauty with great joy:

> Her face too, when covered with sweat, looketh as the lotus or the jasmine. Of slender waist like that of the wasp, of long flowing locks, of red lips, and body without down, is the princess of Pañcāla. O king, making the slender-waisted Draupadī, who is even such as my stake, I will play

with thee, O son of Suvala. (Ganguli, *Sabhā Parva:* Section LXIV, 124)

Yudhiṣṭhira presents himself as the proud 'possessor' of a beautiful wife like Draupadī and he announces that he is proud of playing on her in the game of dice. Yudhiṣṭhira presents Draupadī as the perfect specimen of a woman whom every man wishes to have as his wife. However, his understanding of Draupadī ends up with her external feminine self. Draupadī's inner self is revealed when she faces the toughest time of her life. She comes out both as a feminine and a feminist for the first time after facing the humiliation in the court.

The royal grandeur of Draupadī can be gazed right from her birth. She sprung out of the holy fire of a *yajña* that was being performed by Drupada (the King of Pañcāla) to get a son capable of destroying Droṇa. King Drupada held a *svayaṁvara* to get a suitable groom for his daughter in which all the mighty princes and warriors of the country were invited. The Pāṇḍava-s, too, attended the *svayaṁvara* in the disguise of *brāhmīn*-s. A mighty bow was placed in the marriage hall. All the valiant warriors were given the challenge of putting string on the bow and shoot an arrow in the eye of a revolving fish overhead a water tank. The target needed to be aimed at by watching the reflection of the moving fish in the water tank. After Draupadī had disqualified Karṇa from participating in the

competition, Arjuna rose, strung the bow with ease, and hit the target. Thus Draupadī was wedded to Arjuna.

Though Draupadī was won by Arjuna, she had to marry the other four brothers of Arjuna as well. Dr. Pradip Bhattacharya has raised some serious points against this episode in his article "Enigmas in the *Mahabharata*". Bhattacharya has explained that Yudhiṣṭhira, accompanied by Nakula and Sahdeva had slipped out of the enclosure after Arjuna had pierced the target at the *svayaṁvara*. And later on, when Bhīma and Arjuna had arrived with Draupadī at the potter's hut, the three brothers might have already informed their mother about the success of Arjuna in the *svayaṁvara.* Kuntī's response to Bhīma-Arjuna's announcement that they should enjoy together what they had brought, was by no means a casual remark.

According to Bhattacharya it was a calculated move in the game plan painstakingly laid out by Kuntī to secure the unity of her five sons. Kuntī had sensed the danger of giving Draupadī to Arjuna alone as she had felt her other sons were also mesmerised with the matchless beauty of Draupadī. Kuntī could see what was going on in the minds of her sons as "they began to think of Draupadī alone. Indeed, after those princes of immeasurable energy had looked at Draupadī, the God of Desire invaded their hearts and continued to crush all their senses" (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Svayaṁvara Parva*: Section CLXLIII, 381). Draupadī's beauty was

matchless and superior to all other women on the earth. She had the power to captivate the heart of all the mighty warriors.

When Kuntī asked for precedence, Yudhiṣṭhira immediately jumped up with analogies to support Draupadī's marriage to the five brothers. Invoking his truth telling reputation, he cited an incidence from the Purāṇas about a lady named Jaṭila, the foremost of all virtuous women belonging to the race of Gautama, who had married seven *ṛṣi*-s. He gave another example in which an ascetic's daughter, born of a tree, had married ten brothers having a single name, Pracetas. He reiterated that the five brothers were duty bound to obey their mother:

> O foremost of all, that are acquainted with the rules of morality, it is said that obedience to superior is ever meritorious. Amongst all superiors, it is well known that the mother is the foremost. Even she hath commanded us to enjoy Draupadī as we do anything obtained as alms. It is for this, O best of Brahmana-s, that I regard the (proposed) act as virtuous.' (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Vaivāhika Parva*: Section CLXLVIII, 389)

Drupada was delighted to hear that Arjuna had won the *svayaṁvara*, but the marriage of his daughter to all the five brothers was beyond his understanding. However, Yudhiṣṭhira jumped in to convince Drupada of the ethical necessity of Draupadī getting married to all the brothers to

fulfil the orders of Kunti: “This, O king, is the rule with us; to ever enjoy equally a jewel that we may obtain. O best of monarchs that rule of conduct we cannot now abandon. Kṛṣṇā, therefore, shall become the wedded wife of us all. Let her take our hands, one after another before the fire” (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Vaivāhika Parva*: Section CLXLVII 387-88).

This is surprising as to how Draupadī accepts something without questioning its moral enigma. There are various theories which justify polyandry in the Hindu knowledge texts and Draupadī seems to have abided by them. Born of sacrificial fire, Draupadī had the divine gift of restoring her virginity after consummating her marriage with every brother. As mentioned earlier, some feminist critics argue that Draupadī accepted the proposal of marrying the five brothers to invert the accepted social norms of polyandry. It is a rejection of the accepted conventions of one woman marrying a man and devoting her life for that man. It is a rejection of the gendered role of a wife to remain at the periphery and allow the man take the centre stage. Like an atom with the male nucleus and female electrons revolving on the periphery, Draupadī by this act of polyandry inverses the whole atomic structure by becoming the nucleus and pushing the five males on the outer orbit. This reversal of roles is Draupadī’s first silent step towards realignment of gendered space in Hastināpur.

After the marriage of Draupadī with the five brothers, she accepted them and proved to be a good wife and a good daughter-in-law, and her five husbands felt themselves more powerful and fortunate in her company. When the Pāṇḍava-s returned to Hastināpur with their bride, the partition of kingdom became inevitable as Duryodhana did not return the crown prince title to Yudhiṣṭhira. After the partition, the Pāṇḍava-s transformed Khāṇḍavaprastha into Indraprastha and Draupadī became the most powerful queen of the region.

The magical beauty and glamour of Indraprastha raised the green-eyed monster in Duryodhana, who cherished the possession of Indraprastha along with Hastināpur and he used Yudhiṣṭhira's weakness (of dice) to his advantage.

The court scene of Yudhiṣṭhira losing everything in the game of dice and Duryodhana's failed attempt to disrobe Draupadī is one of the most powerful and heart-wrenching episodes in the *Mahābhārata.* The scene exposes the blatant patriarchal mindset of the court which was of the opinion that husband had the inherent right over his wife as if she were nothing but an object of pleasure. It is in this episode that Draupadī comes into her own and discloses the hypocrisy of learned people like Bhīṣma and Droṇa. It is a powerful manifestation of Draupadī's revolt on being considered a luxury item who could be put at stake by a monarch who had forgotten his *rājadharma*.

Draupadī draws strength from her devotion to Lord Kṛṣṇa while Duḥśāsana is pulling her cloth. All the men present in the court are surprised to witness the incredible power of Draupadī's prayer:

> She thought of Harī. (And she herself cried aloud, saying), 'O Govinda, O Kṛṣṇa, ... O Govinda, save me who am distressed, who am losing my senses in the midst of the Kuru-s.' ... And while Yajñaseni was crying aloud to Kṛṣṇa, also called Viṣṇu and Harī and Nara for protection, the illustrious Dharma, remaining unseen, covered her with excellent clothes of many hues. (Ganguli, *Sabhā Parva*, Section- LXVI 132)

This episode gives birth to a new Draupadī, who is capable of challenging the morality of great elderly people and her own husbands. She had a composed mind although her entire feminine body was burning with flames of anger on the insult that she had to face due to the mistakes of her husband. Pradip Bhattacharya has explained the intellectual strength of Draupadī as she proves that she is a woman of substance and logic with her arguments in the court. She shocks everyone present in the court by challenging the very meaning of *dharma* for Kuru elders. Revealing the inner strength of her character, she fights and makes all the elders ashamed of their inability to support her and save her from the humiliation:

> Her questions show her to be intellectually far superior to all the courtiers. Instead of meekly obeying her husband's summons, as expected from her conduct so far, she sends back a query which remains unanswered till the end of the epic: can a gambler, having lost himself, stake his wife at all? (Bhattacharya, *Revisiting* 167)

With logical and composed arguments Draupadī fought alone for justice in the court, she raised several questions, but no one could answer her. Yudhiṣṭhira staked himself, his properties, his own brothers in their presence but he staked Draupadī in her absence. Draupadī questioned Yudhiṣṭhira's attempt of staking her when he had lost his own self and property in the first place. Draupadī argued that Yudhiṣṭhira had no right to stake her, as she was not his property. Even Yudhiṣṭhira could not answer her. She challenged all the elderly and respected people in the court. If Draupadī would have remained silent and nervous at the time she was being dragged to the assembly and she would have given herself silently to Kaurava-s, the *Mahābhārata* would have become a patriarchal text. Though it took a long time, she successfully took revenge on her insult.

'Morality' is the key word in the whole episode of Draupadī's *cīrharaṇa* (disrobing). When a messenger came to take Draupadī to the assembly after Yudhiṣṭhira had lost her in dice, she said, "the great

ordainer of the world hath, indeed, ordained so. Happiness and misery pay their court to both the wise and unwise. Morality, however, it hath been said, is the one highest object in the world. If cherished, that will certainly dispense blessings to us" (Ganguli, *Sabhā Parva*, Section: LXVI 127). She ordered the messenger to convey her message to the Kaurava-s who had forgotten their morality. She warned the Kaurava-s not to cross the limit of morality.

All the warnings and prayers of Draupadī go in vain, as everyone in the court, including her own husbands, appears paralysed. Duḥśāsana drags Draupadī, wrapped in a single cloth, by her long locks in the presence of the assembly. The duplicity in Yudhiṣṭhira's moral character stands exposed in the episode. The five silent husbands of Draupadī appear voiceless as they meekly accept whatever happens in the court with Draupadī. On finding herself alone Draupadī takes the centre stage and condemns the Kaurava-s and the elderly people in the court. Rather than losing her senses in that humiliating moment, Draupadī roars in the court in anger and upholds the supremacy of her self-respect and honour.

Draupadī appears equally angry with Yudhiṣṭhira and Kaurava-s. The femininity of Draupadī dies with the humiliations she faces as she metamorphoses into a stronger and rebellious woman. While expressing her anger over the immoral act of Yudhiṣṭhira (of gambling on her honour and modesty), she opens up an aperture of chance for the Pāṇḍava-s to

come out of the trap of Kaurava-s. She ensures that her husbands are released from slavery so that her insult is duly avenged. Thus she argues on behalf of the Pāṇḍava-s, especially Yudhiṣṭhira. Draupadī explains how Yudhiṣṭhira fails miserably in understanding the consequences of the game and by doing so, he has brought her in such a condition in which she has no escape but to face the insult.

Duḥśāsana's attempt to disrobe Draupadī has not only dishonoured Draupadī but also put a question mark on the masculinity of the Pāṇḍava-s. Draupadī explains the meaning of morality and she frequently questions the definition of morality and virtue from everyone present in the court. She says that she is a highborn and a chaste woman yet she is compelled to enter the assembly full of men in such an uncomfortable situation. She says that it has been a tradition since the ancient time that the wedded wives of kings are never brought into the public court. However, the Kaurava-s have altered the ancient tradition and brought the wedded wife of king Yudhiṣṭhira in the court.

There is another intriguing question which Draupadī has somehow not raised in the courtroom and she has allowed the elders of Hastināpur to evade an answer to a very uncomfortable issue. Draupadī cites her royal birth and her status of a queen to destroy the righteousness and high ethical ground of the people present in the courtroom. In other words, the act of dragging a queen in the courtroom and disrobing her is an

unpardonable act of *adharma* (unethical behaviour). It is very much relevant for a postmodernist to question whether an act of disrobing a woman of low birth or a slave woman might have fallen within the long rope of courtly morals. There is a succinct difference between the disrobing of a 'women' and a 'princess.' The whole discourse in the *Sabhā Parva* somehow hinges upon the royal lineage of Draupadī rather than the modesty of a woman. Nevertheless, these unasked questions remain unanswered until the text is reinterpreted from a postmodern perspective. A true surge from the periphery to the centre can be complete only when every woman, be it a queen or a slave, gets a chance to challenge the powerful patriarchal centre.

Bhīṣma, after listening to Draupadī, explains that the course of morality is subtle. Even the renowned and reasonable people fail to understand it at times. The meaning of morality changes with other conditions. An indecisive and clueless Bhīṣma says, "I am unable to answer with certitude the question thou hast asked. However, it is certain that as all the Kuru-s have become the slaves of covetousness and folly, the destruction of this race will happen on no distant date" (Ganguli, *Sabhā Parva*, Section- LXVIII 136).

Draupadī's arguments in the assembly create a sense of guilt and fear in the elders. The fiery queen takes a vow in the middle of her humiliation that she will tie up her hair only after it has been smeared

with the blood of Duḥśāsana. Fearing the consequences of the sin committed by his sons, Dhṛtarāṣṭra commands his sons to stop. He offers boons to Draupadī, releases her and her husbands from slavery and gives them back their kingdom and wealth that they had lost in the game of dice. However, the unforgiving Draupadī keeps her hair unbraided till the time Bhīma finishes Duḥśāsana and brings his blood for her hair.

In his book, *The Argumentative Indian* (2005), Amartya Sen has expounded on the reason of Mahābhārata War, "In the epic story of the *Mahābhārata*, the good king Yudhiṣṭhira, reluctant to engage in a bloody battle, is encouraged to fight the usurpers of his throne with 'appropriate anger', and the most eloquent instigator is his wife Draupadī "(9). The tradition is inspired by a popular perception: "The Mahābhārata War was fought to take revenge of the insult of Draupadī. She wanted vengeance and nothing would change her determination" (Chaitanya 8). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article "If Only," argues directly that the insult of Draupadī is the main reason behind the *Mahābhārata* war. The inhuman treatment of Draupadī in the presence of all the elders and her husbands is undoubtedly one of the chief reasons behind the Mahābhārata War.

In the *Vana Parva* of the epic, there are long debates between Yudhiṣṭhira and Draupadī in the forest. Yudhiṣṭhira is reluctant to take revenge from the Kaurava-s as they are his relatives. Draupadī says to

Yudhiṣṭhira that it is not the time for forgiveness. She argues, “The humble and forgiving person is disregarded; while those that are fierce persecute others. He, indeed, is a king who hath recourse to both, each according to its time” (Ganguli, *Vana Parva* Section- XXVIII 59). Yudhiṣṭhira tries to convince Draupadī that he does not wish to be dominated by anger. He addresses Draupadī as a woman of great wisdom and says that she must know that anger is the root of all adversity and it is the cause of destruction of every creature. One who is able to suppress one’s anger earns prosperity. Draupadī counters that Yudhiṣṭhira’s ideology of the virtue of forgiveness cannot work in every condition and situation.

Yudhiṣṭhira’s ideology of morality, truthfulness, and modesty changes with circumstances. When he wishes to marry Draupadī, he comes up with several arguments to convince everyone that the marriage of Draupadī with five brothers is not immoral. However, he loses all his sense of ethics in the game of dice. Yudhiṣṭhira talks of great ideologies but his biggest weakness is his own inability to stand by his ideologies and moral principles. His temptation to play the game of dice with greater players than himself is the biggest mistake of his life as he loses his kingdom, wealth, weapons, brothers and wife.

Listening to the long conversation between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma could not help speaking in support of Draupadī. Bhīma asks his elder brother to take the path trodden by good men and fight for

their kingdom. He questions Yudhiṣṭhira, “What do we gain by living in the asylum of ascetics, thus deprived of virtue, pleasure, and profit? It is not by virtue, nor by honesty, nor by might, but by unfair dice, that our kingdom hath been snatched by Duryodhana. Like a weak offal-eating jackal snatching the prey from mighty lions, he hath snatched away our kingdom” (Ganguli, *Vana Parva* Section: XXXIII 71). Bhīma is unable to understand why should they suffer such distress by abandoning their wealth, which is the source of both virtue and enjoyments? Like Draupadī, Bhīma also wanted to take revenge from the Kaurava-s as soon as possible. Whenever Draupadī felt alone, unprotected, uncared and unloved, she mostly found the unconditional support of Bhīma. She always had about her certain loneliness. She has herself explained her condition: “My situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with and when. Like a communal drinking cup I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not” (Divakaruni, *The Pallace of Illusion* 120). Draupadī has a feeling that she has given her part of love to everyone but she got nothing in return.

Two more incidents are integral to the understanding of Draupadī’s character, i.e. firstly, the attempt of Jayadaratha to abduct Draupadī from the *āśram* in the forest and secondly, Kīcaka’s attempt to seduce Draupadī in the kingdom of Virāṭa. The episode of Draupadī and Jayadratha occurs in *Vana Parva*. Jayadratha gets attracted towards the mesmerising beauty

of Draupadī, “And she looked grand in the superb beauty of her form, and seemed to shed lustre on the woodland around, like lightning illuminating masses of dark clouds. And they who saw her asked themselves, ‘Is this an *apsarā*, or a daughter of the gods, or a celestial phantom?” (Ganguli, *Vana Parva: Draupadī -haraṇa Parva*: Section CCLXIII, 518). Despite knowing her identity, Jayadratha says to Draupadī that her husbands do not deserve her. The sons of Pāṇḍu have “forever fallen away from their high state, and have lost their kingdom for all time to come. Therefore, O thou of beautiful hips, forsaking the sons of Pāṇḍu, be happy by becoming my wife, and share thou with me the kingdoms of Sindhu and Sauvira” (Ganguli, *Vana Parva: Draupadī -haraṇa Parva*: Section CCLXV, 521).

The proposal of Jayadaratha makes Draupadī cautious. In order to allow her husbands some time to reach home to protect her, Draupadī starts talking of morality and engages Jayadaratha with long speeches. She says Jayadaratha that he is a fool “to use such insulting words in respect of those celebrated and terrible warriors, each like unto Indra himself, and who are all devoted to their duties and who never waver in fight with even hosts of *Yakśa*-s and *Rākṣasa*-s” (Ganguli, *Vana Parva: Draupadī Haraṇa Parva*: Section CCLXVI 521). Draupadī says that it does not matter whether they live in the forest or in palace. Draupadī explains to Jayadaratha that even the mighty Indra can never take her with him as she is protected by the likes of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna.

By the time Draupadī's five husbands arrive, she successfully engages Jayadaratha in her conversation. Seeing the Pāṇḍava-s coming towards him, Jayadaratha got panicky and tried unsuccessfully to escape. Draupadī demanded capital punishment for Jayadrath for his amorous advances. However, Jayadaratha was forgiven by Yudhiṣṭhira and its implication was visible during the war as the king of Sindhu caused the fall of Abhimanyu. Draupadī believes in punishment for those who commit sin and wants her husbands to kill whosoever dishonours her.

In *Virāṭa Parva*, Draupadī finds herself in trouble when Kīcaka, the brother in law of Virāṭa, tries to seduce her. The whole episode and dialogues between Kīcaka and Draupadī help in understanding the depth of Draupadī's character. She warns Kīcaka that his desires for her will take his life, "Why dost thou desire me, even like an infant lying on its mother's lap wishing to catch the moon? For thee that thus solicitest their beloved wife, there is no refuge either on earth or in sky. O Kīcaka, hast thou no sense which leads thee to seek thy good and by which thy life may be saved?" (Ganguli, *Virāṭa Parva: Kīcaka-badha Parva*: Section XVI: 26).

Draupadī's matchless feminine beauty often puts her in danger but in that condition she uses her brain. Moreover, when she needs physical strength she seeks support from her powerful husbands, especially Bhīma. When Kīcaka advances towards her, she rebukes him viciously. Once again Draupadī's anger is raised, "the beautiful princess, unable to tolerate it,

and with frame trembling with wrath, and breathing quickly, dashed him to the ground. And dashed to the ground thus, the sinful wretch tumbled down like a tree whose roots had been cut" (Ganguli, *Virāṭa Parva: Kīcaka-Vadha Parva* Section: XVI 27). After releasing herself from the grip of Kīcaka, Draupadī rushed to the court of king Virāṭa where Yudhiṣṭhira, in disguise of a courtier, was playing dice with the king. Yudhiṣṭhira, in order to save his actual identity, once again failed to rescue Draupadī from Kīcaka. Even the king is helpless against his army general and brother-in-law Kīcaka.

Draupadī went to Bhīma to seek solace and revenge. Draupadī reminds Bhīma that the game of dice has brought her to the level of working in the palace in the guise of Sairindhṛī under Sudeśnā's command. Even while narrating her insult at the hands of Kīcaka, she philosophically explains how prosperity and adversity revolve like a wheel and she is awaiting the return of favourable fortune. She says to Bhīma that Yudhiṣṭhira (Kañka) is helpless and he cannot help her, as it will risk the disclosure of his disguise. Draupadī could not bear such a straightforward reply from Yudhiṣṭhira and tears rolled down her cheeks. She could not go to Bṛhannalā and the twins who always followed their elder brother. That left Bhīma, who was always quick to come forward for her safety (Pattanaik, *Jaya* 212). Draupadī persuades Kīcaka to visit her in

the night in the music chamber of Bṛhannalā, where the powerful Bhīma would be ready to bring him to book.

When finally the time came when war with the Kaurava-s became imminent, Draupadī became an active speaker. When Kṛṣṇa offered to go on his peace mission to the Kaurava-s in a final attempt to avoid the war, she came before him and, taking her long, thick, curly black hair in her hand, appealed to him to remember her hair as he talked of peace at Hastināpur.

There are some remarkable modern interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* in which Draupadī occupies the central position. For example, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions,* Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi,* Mahasweta Devi's short story, "Draupadi", etc. bring about various traits of Draupadī's character in the contemporary context. These interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* have been analysed elaborately in the fifth Chapter.

All these separate episodes related to Draupadī can be joined together to construct a powerful postmodernist analysis of gender in the text. There are three important points that need to be mentioned. Firstly, all these minor episodes represent the micro-narrative of Draupadī's identity. The narrative breaks the overarching grand narrative into small pieces that allows Draupadī to garner a pivotal position in the plot. All the

powerful and mighty warriors like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Arjuna, and Bhīma are relegated to peripheral positions.

Secondly, Draupadī rips apart a misnomer that the virtuous and pious women in the Indian tradition are bereft of aggressive behaviour. The aggression that is often associated with valour is transformed into a potent weapon of resistance by Draupadī. The phallogocentric charade of chivalry is deconstructed by a hyperactive and forthright retaliatory resistance against the parochial male centric worldview of ancient India. The idea of passive resistance has no place in Draupadī's worldview.

Thirdly and finally, the moral and ethical taboos are reinterpreted by the character of Draupadī. The uniqueness of Draupadī's character lies in her attitude towards polyandry, passivity, imposed restrictions of values and the delicacy associated with females. The quotation from *Panchakanya* at the beginning of the chapter aptly winds up the conclusion of Draupadī's character analysis.

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Chapter 4

Dynamics of Motherhood: Place of Satyavatī, Kuntī and Gāndhārī in the *Mahābhārata*

In Indian thought, the source of happiness of the individual and society is the network of human relationships and this network is centred in the 'family'. Therefore 'family' is the all important social unit around which all social structure is built. Wife – Mother is therefore the key stone of social arch. She is Lakṣmī, the one responsible for husbanding the resources. As such she must be honoured. No rites or rituals can be performed without her. In receiving respect in public, she takes precedence over father and teacher. (Kapoor 57)

The conceptualisation of women in fact takes place from three points of view: ontological, as individual and as social. As an individual, a woman is seen as fragile and delicate physically in a certain sense but emotionally and spiritually stronger than man. As a social being, she is central to the whole social structure in her bio-social role as mother. (Kapoor 58)

In the above quotes, Kapil Kapoor aptly explains how the philosophy of life revolves around the Indian thought of keeping wife-mother on the highest pedestal of respect and this ultimately leads to the happiness of a family that is a part of the overall social structure. Chandrakala Padia emphasizes in the "Introduction" of the book *Women in Dharmaśāstras* that there is a need to "reemphasise and reinterpret the Indian ideals of *Ardhanārīśvara*, *Dharmapatnī*, and *Sahadharminī*. It would further help in deconstructing the myth of the so-called superior 'public' (male) and inferior 'private' (female) in the Western philosophical tradition as the *Dharamśāstra*-s*'* ideal is self-realisation equally both for men and women" (6). It can be inferred, therefore, that there is no debate on the equality of a man and a woman in the *Dharamśāstra*-s. This very concept of being superior and inferior on the basis of one's gender is challenged in the epic *Mahābhārata*. It is a myth that widows in India have had no agency and they are marginalised. On the contrary, motherhood and widowhood grant more powerful and responsible position to Indian women. After becoming a widow, a mother has to play the roles of a father as well as a mother. They occupy more essential and central position in the family. In the *Mahābhārata*, Satyavatī and Kuntī are two very powerful and influential widows.

As discussed in the first chapter, the most pertinent discourse in post-modernism revolves around the centre-periphery debate. All the theories

that aim at construction of 'identity' invariably touch upon the marginal voices gaining centrality in the discourse. The peripheral post-colonial, post-feminist and post-modern subject strives towards attainment of an agency to make way towards the centre. One fine example of a woman gaining central agency in the *Mahābhārata* is Satyavatī. Born in a family of fishermen, she was designed to marry within her own community culturally and socially. However, she not only became the queen of Hastināpur but also governed and dominated her husband Śāntanu to the extent that Bhīṣma was compelled to take a vow that he would remain unmarried the whole life. She does not give the impression of any typical feminine traits such as being passive, voiceless, vulnerable, or self-sacrificing, as she uses both her mind and her feminine body for creating her space, power and identity.

Satyavatī is perhaps the most ambitious woman in the text. She always keeps some conditions ready for those who get attracted towards her feminine beauty. Before her marriage with Śāntanu, she had happened to meet Parāśara one day. The great *ṛṣi* (sage) got attracted towards the beauty and graceful smile of Satyavatī. Satyavatī put three conditions before Parāśara. The first condition was to preserve complete secrecy of their union from the people of that place. She got assurence from Parāśara, who created a veil of fog that enveloped the whole region in darkness. After that, she immediately put forth her second condition:

> ‘O holy one, note that I am a maiden under the control of my father. O sinless one, by accepting your embraces my virginity will be sullied. O best of Brāhmaṇa-s, my virginity being sullied, how shall I, O *ṛṣi*, be able to return home? Indeed, I shall not then be able to bear life. ... That best of *ṛṣi*-s, gratified with all she said, replied, “Thou shall remain a virgin even if thou grantest my wish. (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva*: Section LXIII 126)

Virginity of a woman is supposed to be the symbol of her chastity and Satyavatī wishes to remain virgin even after her union with the sage. Instead of preserving her virginity, she would have wished to get married to Parāśara but she did not do so because her ambitions were high. After gaining the boon of not losing her virginity, she asked the sage to grant her a boon that her body might emit a sweet scent (instead of the fishodour that it had). The illustrious *ṛṣi* thereupon granted her all the wishes. Being the daughter of a fisherman, she had a strong fishy smell and that smell confined her to a fixed identity. She had a feeling that her fishy smell would keep her on the margins and she would never be able to come out of her identity of a fisherwoman. When Satyavatī got satisfied with the fulfilment of her three conditions, she accepted the embrace of Parāśara. Out of her communion with Parāśara, she gave birth to a son, Vyāsa who went away from her on the path of asceticism with the promise

of returning to her in times of need. Here Satyavatī does not play the role of a mother, but the son is ready to perform his duty towards his mother. Her meeting with the great *ṛṣi* was like a boon that made her fortunate. Though the gender and cultural binaries are broken by Satyavatī, she is not questioned because she regains her virginity and her son goes on the path of asceticism. Traditionally, the integrity of a woman's virginity has been considered mandatory before marriage. It is supposed to be a curse to become a mother before marriage. Almost the same thing happens with Kuntī also but she has to face the consequences of leaving her son. Unlike Kuntī, Satyavatī thinks of her present and future and constructs all the conditions favourable to her by putting certain conditions before Parāśara. Therefore, in this context, the postmodern perception appears true that the world is interpreted by individuals; the cultural and social construction is made up by individual responses to different things, and such responses cannot be real or true for everyone. Both Kuntī and Satyavatī become mothers before marriage and hide this secret from everyone. While pre-marriage motherhood is helpful for Satyavatī in future, it brings misfortunes to Kuntī.

Satyavatī was aware of the socio-cultural tenets that governed the life of a woman; therefore, she asked for the boon to regain her virginity and sent her son on the path of austerity. The *Mahābhārata* is a cultural text and the postmodernists question the cultural construction of gender

binaries and explore how through language, power, and motivation any belief or idea develops. Ann Brook has explained that postmodernism is a cultural study, "concerned with debates linking representations and identities within newly defined cultural spaces" (189). Satyavatī has meticulously redefined the cultural spaces to construct her identity.

When Satyavatī meets Śāntanu, she does not disclose her history to the king for fear of rejection. Taking advantage of Śāntanu's strong desire for Satyavatī, her father put certain conditions for the king before marriage:

> O sinless one, thou art truthful: if thou desirest to obtain this maiden as a gift from me, give me then this pledge. If, indeed, thou givest the pledge, I will of course bestow my daughter upon thee for truly I can never obtain a husband for her equal to thee...' 'O king, what I ask of thee is this: the son born of this maiden shall be installed by thee on thy throne and none else shall thou make thy successor.' (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Sambhava Parva*: Section C, 215-216)

Śāntanu disapproved of the demand of Satyavatī's father and returned to Hastināpur. Satyavatī had created a magic on the king with her fragrant and feminine beauty and she was confident that the king would come back to her. Devavrata could not see his father's condition and went to request the chief of the fishermen to give his daughter in

marriage with Śāntanu. This incident of a son going to fix the marriage of his father is rare even today but the *Mahābhārata* is a text in which the cultural doctrines are manipulated with ease to meet the situation. The fisherman asked Devavrata to promise that the son of Satyavatī would succeed Śāntanu on the throne of Hastināpur. Devavrata accepted the condition of the fisherman for the sake of his father and took the solemn vow of lifelong celibacy.

After her marriage with the king, Satyavatī governed not only her husband but also dictated her step son Devavrata, who came to be known as Bhīṣma due to his vow of remaining unmarried for the whole life. Satyavatī gave birth to two sons, namely Citrāngada and Vicitravīrya. Bhīṣma obeyed the command of Satyavatī and installed Citrāngada on the throne of Hastināpur. Citrāngada invited his death soon by fighting against the powerful king of the Gandharva-s. Between the Gandharva-s and Citrāngada "there occurred on the field of Kurukshetra a fierce combat which lasted full three years on the banks of the Sarasvatī" (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva*: Section CI 219). Citrāngada died an early death. After the death of Citrāngada, Bhīṣma installed Vicitravīrya, still a minor, on the throne of the Kurus. Bhīṣma had once arranged for his father's marriage sacrificing his whole life and again he took the responsibility of bringing wives for Vicitravīrya. Bhīṣma got to know that the three daughters of the king of Kāśī would select their husband in a *svayaṁvara*.

Gate-crashing in the court room of the king of Kāśī, Bhīṣma forcefully brought the three princesses to Hastināpur for getting married to Vicitravīrya. Among the three sisters, Ambikā and Ambālikā got married to Vicitravīrya, while Ambā revolted, as she was in love with king Śālva. The princess was returned back to Kāśī. When Śālva declined to marry her, she came back to Vicitravīrya, who refused to marry her. Ambā was not able to bear her insults and demanded marriage to Bhīṣma as he was the one responsible for her miseries. Bhīṣma refused to marry her. Ambā took a vow to cause the fall of Bhīṣma, which has been discussed in detail in the next chapter. In short, the whole life of Bhīṣma is badly affected by two women, Satyavatī and Ambā.

Bhīṣma gives his whole life for the welfare of Satyavatī and her sons and forgets his duty towards the society and the people of his kingdom. Satyavatī, on the other hand, has to face the consequences of her *karma* as Vicitravīrya died after a few years without giving Hastināpur a legal heir: "He was attacked while yet in the prime of youth, with phthisis. Friends and relatives in consultation with one another tried to affect a cure. But in spite of all efforts, the Kuru prince died, setting like the evening sun" (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Sambhava Parva* Section: CII 222).

Satyavatī fell in deep sorrow after the successive deaths of her husband and two sons. She asked Bhīṣma to marry the widows of Vicitravīrya. Bhīṣma, who had obeyed all the commands of his step-

mother, rejected her proposal of this marriage. Bhīṣma left it on Satyavatī to decide the fate of Hastināpur. Then she called her son Vyāsa to visit the palace and bless Hastināpur with an heir: "In a kingdom where there is no king, the people perish from want of protection; sacrifices and other holy acts are suspended; the clouds send no showers; and the gods disappear. How can a kingdom be protected that hath no king? Therefore, see thou that the ladies conceive" (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva* Section: CV 228-29). Satyavatī does everything under the sun in order to ensure that Hastināpur does not become a kingless kingdom. Her leadership skills put her in a much more powerful position than her male counterparts.

Kuntī, Satyavatī's grand-daughter-in-law, is a remarkable character in the *Mahābhārata*. She is especially known for her motherhood. In her maidenhood, she served the fiery sage Durvāsā, who rewarded her with a boon in the form of a *mantra*. He proclaimed, "thou shall be able to summon (to thy side) whatever celestials thou likest. And, by their grace, shall thou also obtain children" (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Sambhava Parva* Section: LXVII 144-145). The righteous Kuntī, in excitement, tried to test the power of the *mantra.* She invoked the Sūrya deva, who responded promptly to the call. She saw the beaming and radiant Sun god coming near her and saying, "Here I am, O black-eyed girl! Tell me what I am to do for thee" (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Sambhava Parva* Section: CXI235). Kuntī tried her best to convince the Sun god that she had only tested the

potency of the *mantra*, but the Sun god didn't agree to return without granting her a child, "I know that Durvāsā hath granted this boon. But cast off thy fears, timid maiden, and grant me thy embraces. Amiable one, my approach cannot be futile; it must bear fruit. Thou hast summoned me, and if it be for nothing, it shall certainly be regarded as thy transgression" (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Sambhava Parva* Section: CXI 236). As a result of this communion, Kuntī gave birth to a son, Karṇa who was born laced with celestial armour and earrings.

Fearful of her social standing, Kuntī disposed the child by floating him in the river Gangā and kept her chastity intact to the world. Later on, she chose Pāṇḍu in *svayaṁvara* only to find him getting married to the captivating Mādrī. Cursed by a sage, Pānḍu retreats to the woods along with his two wives. Owing to the curse of the sage, Pānḍu is unable to mate with his wives and he becomes restless to think of his inability to have a son. He shares his feelings with Kuntī in private:

> Strive thou to raise offspring at this time of distress. The wise expounders of the eternal religion declare that a son, O Kuntī, is the cause of virtuous fame in the three worlds. It is said that sacrifices, charitable gifts, ascetic penances, and vows observed most carefully, do not confer religious merit on a sonless man. ... The self-born Manu hath said that men failing to have legitimate offspring of their own

> may have offspring begotten upon their wives by others, for sons confer the highest religious merit. (Ganguli, *Ādi Parva: Sambhava Parva*: Section CXX 251)

Kuntī initially refuses to produce an offspring from another man. This is somewhat ironic as she had once embraced the god Arka (Sun) and like Satyavatī she had recovered her virginity after giving birth to Karṇa. Kuntī hides this secret from her husband with her determination to carry on an unblemished reputation. Unlike Satyavatī, Kuntī keeps her past under wraps and does not disclose anything about her pre-marital son Karṇa. Pāṇḍu tries to convince her to get an offspring from anyone with his sanction, but Kuntī keeps her secret undisclosed for a long while. She urges Pāṇḍu to be heroic and emulate Vyuśītaśva who died prematurely because of overindulgence, but whose wife Bhadra obtained seven sons by embracing his corpse. Pāṇḍu refuses to invite death-in-intercourse with Kuntī (though that is precisely what he does with Mādrī) and urges that she will only be doing what is sanctioned by the knowledge texts. Finally, Kuntī tells him about the *mantra* she learnt from sage Durvāsā and Pāṇḍu immediately pushed her to evoke gods for offspring. Kuntī evokes the Dharmarāja, the Vāyūdeva and Indra to get three sons, Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma and Arjuna respectively from them. Very much like his grandmother, Pāṇḍu urges Kuntī to give him more and more sons. Kuntī bluntly refuses, quoting the knowledge texts, which forbid a woman from embracing more

than three men (a woman embracing five men is a whore by those standards). She hides the fact that Arjuna is her fourth conception and she has had relations with four different men. Since Pāṇḍu accepted her logic, it can be inferred that the gods were indeed men and their godly incarnation was no exemption from the rules prescribed in the knowledge texts. Thus, out of her own mouth Kuntī appears to condemn herself unawares. If her logic is applied in a general way, it would be difficult to justify the chastity of Draupadī. However, Draupadī is a completely different case and her marriage to five men has been discussed in the previous chapter in detail.

After the death of Pāṇḍu, Kuntī brings up five children (two from Mādrī) in a hostile court, bereft of allies. Quickly she turns to Satyavatī's favourite grandson by a maid-servant - Vidura. He proves to be loyal to the family of Pāṇḍu. It is he who saves them from being burnt alive in Varṇāvat and it is in his home that Kuntī takes shelter when her sons are exiled. He even accompanies her at the very end into the forest. Iravati Karve has surmised that Dharmarāja, the first "god" summoned by Kuntī, is none other than Vidura. However, this surmise has been contested by many scholars of the *Mahābhārata*.

Even in the forest, Kuntī rallies the drooping spirits of her sons with unerring instinct. Kuntī allows the marriage of Bhīma with Hidimbā, who gave birth to a powerful son named Ghatotkaca. Ghatotkaca went on to

save Arjuna from Karṇa's infallible weapon at the cost of his own life. Thus, the Pāṇḍava dynasty is slowly but surely structured into an entity with multiracial affinities.

Kuntī trains her sons to safeguard the welfare of common people even at the risk of their lives. In Ekacakra, Kuntī was living with her five sons in the house of a poor Brahmin. The township was living under the constant threat of a demon namely Bakāsur. A deal had been struck between the demon and the inhabitants of Ekacakra. Every family had to send one of its members and enough food for the demon in a stipulated time perion. When the turn of poor Brahmin's family came, Kuntī sent Bhīma to finish the demon. The enforced exile brought her sons into intimate contact with the common people, so that they developed an empathy with the masses. Kuntī 's maturity and foresight and her ability to observe life closely and set her apart and above all characters in the epic.

Her decision to proceed to Pañcāla is another step in order to forge a marital alliance with the traditional enemy of Hastināpur and challenge the Kaurava-s. Vyāsa had already briefed them about Draupadī's beauty and had urged them to proceed to Pañcāla to win her. Kuntī's foresight perceives that any split among the united five will frustrate the goal of mastering Hastināpur. Hence, she plays that grim charade of pretending not to know what Bhīma and Arjuna mean when they ask her to see what they have brought home. She asks the brothers to share the 'thing' they

had brought as alms. It is baffling to accept that Kuntī was unaware of the fact that Arjuna had won the hand of Draupadī in the court of Drupada. Yudhiṣṭhira, Nakula and Sahadeva had slipped out of the *svayaṁvara* after Draupadī had been won. They might have briefed their mother about the happenings in the court. Kuntī knew that the only way to forge an unbreakable link among the five was not to allow them to get engrossed in different wives. Hence, Kuntī deliberately asked her sons to share and enjoy whatever they had brought. After 'discovering' her 'mistake', her only worry was to ensure that her command would fall within the purview of *dharma*. This episode is a magnificent tribute to the total respect and implicit obedience paid by the brothers to Kuntī, which is unparalleled in the epic.

Hereafter, Kuntī retreats into the background, giving up the place of pride to Draupadī. After this, she emerges from the shadows to intervene decisively thrice. When her sons are exiled, she decides to stay back in Hastināpur as a silent but constant reproach to Dhṛtarāṣṭra about her sons' violated rights. Later, in the *Udyoga Parva*, she tells Kṛṣṇa, who has come on a peace-mission, to urge Yudhiṣṭhira to fight for their rights as kṣatriya-s must. To secure the safety of her sons, she takes the conscious decision to undergo the trauma of acknowledging her shame to her first-born, kept secret so long. Though she is rejected by Karṇa, he promises her that he would not kill any Pāṇḍava but Arjuna. Moreover, she effectively weakens

him from within. While he knows that he is battling his mother's sons, the Pāṇḍava-s are only aware that he is the detestable charioteer's son.

Kuntī has a rare capacity to surprise us as she decides to retire to the forest along with Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Gāndhārī, to spend her last days serving those who were responsible for her sufferings. Kuntī tells her sons that she has no desire to enjoy the luxury of the palace after the scores have been settled between the Pāṇḍava-s and the Kaurava-s. She effortlessly transcends the symbiotic bonds of maternity. It has been expounded by many that she is probably the incarnation of *siddhi* (fulfilment). She is indeed the consummation of womanhood and the archetype of a single mother. Mādrī, Ambikā, Ambālikā, Gāndhārī and Subhadrā represent the exact opposite. Mādrī immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre. Gāndhārī blinds herself so that she does not exceed her husband. Kuntī is different from all of them. She not only decides her own destiny, but also guides the fate of her powerful sons, who look towards her for guidance in every situation. Kuntī is an answer to all those who bring forth the passivity of women in the classical Indian texts.

The next important character defining motherhood in the *Mahābhārata* is Gāndhārī. When she was married to Dhṛtarāṣṭra, she put a blindfold over her eyes to renounce the gift of vision, which her husband does not possess. If the world of sight did not exist for her husband, then she did not want it for herself either. However, many critics opine that she

took this decision to showcase her passive ressistence of being married to a blind man.

Unlike the other female characters in the epic, Gāndhārī has no desire to see the face of the man she is married to and with whom she has to spend a lifetime, the one who is supposed to father her children. When Gāndhārī became a mother, she did not see the face of her children either. Her blindfold remains firm on her face throughout the *Mahābhārata*. Towards the end of the Great War, when Duryodhana has lost all the warriors on his side, she opens her blindfold once to make her son powerful enough to turn the result of the war overhead singlehandedly.

Gāndhārī is one of the most prominent female characters in the *Mahābhārata*. During her years as queen in the Kaurava court, she is present for many of the pivotal events that lead to the fateful encounter at Kurukshetra. In particular, she witnesses the dicing match and the disrobing of Draupadī; and she monitors a number of attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement described in the *Udyogaparva*. Although she remains silent during most of these scenes, she does speak up on a number of occasions, trying to persuade her son Duryodhana not to go to war, and criticizes her husband for not standing up against their son.

Gāndhārī's attempts to avert the war are of no avail. However, her ability to intervene effectively is illustrated after the failed attempt of disrobing of Draupadī, when she forces the king to step in and put an end

to the abuse inflicted upon Draupadī. Although Gāndhārī's involvement is subtle, it prompts the king to grant Draupadī a boon, which in turn leads to setting the Pāṇḍava-s free from the conditions of the first dicing match. In addition to her attendance at events leading up to the war, Gāndhārī is present throughout Sanjay's account of the war, as indicated by several explicit references to her and the other women of the Kuru court.

As Brian Black rightly points out, Gāndhārī's presence in the Kaurava court before and during the war has particular relevance in connection with her grieving on the war-torn battlefield after the war, when Vyāsa grants her the divine vision, allowing her to see despite her blindfold the mourning of the Kuru women. During her dialogue with Kṛṣṇa, she describes in vivid detail the dismembered bodies that are strewn across the blood-soaked battlefield. She mourns the deaths of her sons, speaks of the losses suffered by the Kuru women, and makes several statements denouncing the war. Her narration to Kṛṣṇa is not based on the temporary divine vision that has been granted to her by the sage Vyāsa. It is an amalgam of all that she has heard and felt during the war, the losses she has suffered and the pains she has gone through. In her dialogue with Kṛṣṇa, she makes a number of remarks that indicate her awareness of how events are reported, pointing out the irony that the warriors who were 'regularly celebrated by bards singing their praises' are now surrounded by the cries of jackals. In contrast to the wailing women in the battlefield,

Gāndhārī is able to verbalize her sorrow, with her remarks suggesting that there is a direct connection between her role as a listener and her role as speaker and chief articulator of the grieving and suffering of the Kuru women. Since she has played a crucial role in the preceding episodes leading up to the war, she understands its complexities and is able to look back and reflect on what she has seen and heard.

Despite her own losses, Gāndhārī primarily reports to Kṛṣṇa about the grief of others, which makes her narration all the more poignant and so unique. Her divine sight gives her access to the mourning of Kuru women, yet her role as listener informs her ability to articulate these disparate accounts in a transmittable narrative that gives a voice to the otherwise silent Kuru women.

To conclude, motherhood is a powerful means of understanding the challenge posed by the female characters of the *Mahābhārata*. It symbolizes an undercurrent of resistance that permeates the role of women in the text. Motherhood rips apart the established patriarchal set-up that gives agency to the men to decide the fate of nations.

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Chapter 5

The 'Other' Gender in the *Mahābhārata* : A Study of Arjuna/Bṛhannalā and Ambā/Śikhaṇḍī

I am neither male nor female.

I am both male and female.

I am firm and flexible.

I am aware and I am not.

To appreciate this fluidity of nature

And the shifting rigidities of culture

Is to appreciate queerness.

(Pattanaik 14)

In the Introduction to his work *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014), Devdutt Pattanaik argues that Hindu mythology makes constant references to queerness, the idea that questions notions of 'maleness' and 'femaleness'. There are stories of "men who become women, and women who become men, of men who create children without women, and women who create children without men, and of creatures who are neither this, nor that, but a little bit of both, like the *makara* (a combination of fish and elephant) or the *yali* (a combination of lion and elephant)" (Pattanaik 14).

Taking off from Pattanaik's emphasis on multiplicity of the 'other' voice in the *Mahābhārata*, I have looked upon two characters of the *Mahābhārata* in detail in this chapter - Arjuna/Bṛhannalā and Ambā/Śikhaṇḍī. These two characters have been studied by a few western researchers as well in light of queer theory. Andrea Custodi's article "Show You Are a Man! Trans-sexuality and Gender Bending in the Characters of Arjuna/Brihannala and Amba/Shikhandini" is a fine analysis of the two characters. Custodi's PhD thesis titled "*Dharma* and Desire: Lacan and the Left Half of the *Mahabharata"* is a study of gender roles in the *Mahābhārata* from a Lacanian point of view.

Custodi has tried to explain the correspondence between gender and *dharma* (ethical duty) in the *Mahābhārata*. Gender can be taken as one of the primary pedestals upon which complex construction of *dharma* stands in the great epic. Both the categories, i.e. gender and *dharma*, are well established but they are superseded, confronted, and infringed throughout the text. Custodi uses the theoretical perspective of transsexuality in order to break the binaries of gender. Custodi argues that in the case of Arjuna/Bṛhannalā and Ambā /Śikhaṇḍī, "traditional categories of gender and sexuality are most poignantly challenged and transgressed in ways that provide suggestive insights into contemporary theorizing on selfhood and subjectivity" (211). Custodi further explains that if we do a careful analysis of the different aspects, "we can see themes of gender and

subjectivity intricately interwoven in ways that might offer feminists, Lacanians, and South Asianists food for thought" (211).

The episode related to the curse of Urvaśī upon Arjuna is a very interesting one. When the war with Kaurava-s looked imminent, Arjuna went to the abode of Indra (Amrāvatī) to get the *divyāstra*-s (celestial weapons). At Amrāvatī, Urvaśī approached Arjuna with the desire to make love with him. Arjuna rejected her proposal on the pretext that he happened to be a descendent of Pururava of Kuru clan with whom she had made love hundreds of years back. Therefore, she was a motherly figure for him and the physical intimacy between the two would be incestuous. Offended by her rejection, Urvaśī cursed Arjuna, "O Pārtha, thou shalt have to pass thy time among females unregarded, and as a dancer, and destitute of manhood and scorned as a eunuch" (Ganguli, *Vana Parva*: Section XLVI, 103). Arjuna was aghast at the unexpected turn of events. However, Indra interefered to get the duration of the curse reduced to one year only.

Indra consoled Arjuna, "O sinless one, ye will have on earth to pass the thirteenth year (of your exile), unknown to all. It is then that thou shalt suffer the curse of Urvaśī. And having passed one year as a dancer without manhood, thou shalt regain thy power on the expiration of the term" (Ganguli, *Vana Parva*: Section XLVI, 103-104). The episode holds a lot of significance for a postmodern analysis of the *Mahābhārata*. Power

structure is the primary target to be deconstructed by the postmodernist. Arjuna went to Amrāvatī to add the celestial weapons to his armory in order to enhance his power. A female, Urvaśī intervened to strip him of his masculinity, the very signifier of his power. The celestial weapons are given to Arjuna with this curse as a restriction. Femininity and masculinity are both associated with the physicality of self. As femininity has always been symbolised as something fragile, delicate and weak, masculinity symbolises strength, hardness and activeness. However, the curse is used by Arjuna during the thirteenth year to hide his brilliant persona in the garb of Bṛhannalā.

Robert Goldman has made an oedipal analysis of Arjuna's predicament. According to Goldman, Arjuna having refused the sexually voracious mother and having been cursed to sexual impotence (read castration) for it, is rewarded for this gesture by his father who restores him his phallus, with only a traumatic trace of the original punishment to live out (380). However, the Freudian method of analysis is hardly authentic in the Indian tradition. After the end of 12 years in exile, Arjuna discloses Yudhiṣṭhira his plan for the one year of secrecy. He says that he will declare himself as one of the 'other' sex and he will be called by the name Bṛhannalā. Apart from entertaining the king and his courtiers with music and dance, he shall also "instruct the women of Virāṭa's palace in singing and delightful modes of dancing and in musical instruments of

diverse kinds" (Ganguli, *Virāṭa Parva*: Section II, 4). The exact nature of Arjuna's sex as Bṛhannalā is not clear as the text gives no evidence whether Arjuna is simply cross-dressing as a female or he has lost his masculinity due to the curse of Urvaśī. When the non-masculinity of Arjuna was confirmed, he was allowed to teach dance and music to Uttarā.

The symbolism behind Arjuna's disguise has been analyzed from various viewpoints by critics. Alf Hiltebeitel writes that the epic descriptions leave it amusingly imprecise and ambiguous whether Arjuna is physiologically a eunuch, a hermaphrodite, or simply a transvestite (154). Alf Hiltebeitel questions whether this is a manifestation of a weakness in a staunchly patriarchal culture, a subtle subversion of it, or a testament to its subtlety and elasticity. What can this crossing of genders in the hero of the story mean? Hiltebeitel argues that Arjuna's transsexual disguise is a "clear evocation of the androgynous Śiva" (153), which might support the idea that in the *Mahābhārata* genders may cross as much as the realms of human and divine. Arjuna's human body can be transformed into a divine one through wrestling with Śiva. His masculine body may also be transformed into a feminine or androgynous one through "identification with this god-who-is-half-woman" (149).

Furthermore, Arjuna and Draupadī can be understood as symbolic manifestation of Śiva and the Śakti. As Custodi points out, Draupadī is not

only the serene goddess extolled as the perfect wife – chaste, demure, and devoted to her husbands – she also repeatedly shows herself to be "intellectual, assertive, and sometimes downright dangerous, driving her husbands to the bloody revenge that will empty the earth of kings" (213).

The female guise proves equally helpful for Bhīma. He uses the guise of a woman to trick Kīcaka into a fight. Sally Sutherland uses this episode to compare Bhīma and Arjuna. When it comes to fulfilment of marital duty of safeguarding the honour of wife, Arjuna is a failure. As Sutherland writes, Draupadī is an aggressive and dynamic character in contrast with her cautious and ineffectual husbands and the "repeated attacks on Draupadī are enhanced by the fact that the insults are overtly sexual and thus raise questions about their masculinity" (72). During the year in disguise, Draupadī seems to be wearing the proverbial pants while Arjuna wears the skirt.

There is a continuing ambiguity about Arjuna's disguise as Bṛhannalā. At one point of time, in the battlefield, he tells Uttara that he is not a eunuch and that he is just standing by his elder brother's words by maintaining abstinence. However, whatever be the exact nature of Arjuna's disguise and however much he might insist on his masculinity, Arjuna's nonmasculinity is nonetheless firm enough for him to be allowed into the quarters of Uttarā. Draupadī is not able to bear the sight of Arjuna in the disguise of a woman. She laments the condition of Arjuna, the most

masculine and mighty man in the world. It was painful for her to see him singing and dancing to please women. She says, “O Bhīma, beholding that terrible bowman, Arjuna, now wearing braids and in the midst of women, my heart is stricken with woe. That high-souled hero who is master of all the celestial weapons, and who is the repository of all the sciences, now weareth ear-rings (like one of the fair sex)” (Ganguli, *Virāṭa Parva*: Section XIX, 34-35). Draupadī goes on pouring her heart and explains that Arjuna possesses matchless power as a fighter and now he is playing the role of “the dancing-master of king Virāṭa's daughter.

This pathetic condition of Arjuna is probably a penance for all his mistakes. His inability to raise his voice against his own brother when Draupadī was being insulted in the court by Duryodhana may have a bearing on this curse upon Arjuna. *Mahābhārata* is a treatise that puts *karma* (actions) at the highest pedestal. If the greatest warrior of all did not have the agency to act against an act of extreme *adharma* (unethical behaviour), he was bound to do penance. It is Draupadī who finally helps him come out of his feminine role by proposing his name as charioteer to Uttara to face the mighty army of Hastināpur.

Arjuna regains his masculine self in the battlefield after a terrified Uttara tries to run away. It is like a second coming for Arjuna as he walks into manhood and singlehandedly defeats the Hastināpur army. Yudhiṣṭhira speaks in praise of Bṛhannalā only to get his nose broken by

the angry King Virāṭa, who is basking in the false glory of his son's exploits in the battlefield. However, when Bṛhannalā's true identity is disclosed, King Virāṭa laments his action and asks forgiveness for his treatment to the Pāṇḍava-s. He also offers his daughter Uttarā in marriage to Arjuna. But Arjuna, being her teacher, treat Uttarā as a daughter and she was given in marriage to Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna.

The second character that deserves analysis in this chapter is Ambā/ Śikhaṇḍī whose story spans two lives in the *Mahābhārata*. As Devdutt Pattanaik observes, Śikhaṇḍīni, who became Śikhaṇḍī, is what modern queer vocabulary would call "a female-to-male transsexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally. But she is portrayed either as a eunuch (castrated male), a male-to-female trans-sexual (a man who rejects his male biology), a male-to-female transgender (a man who wears women's clothes as he feels like a woman), an intersexed hermaphrodite, or simply a man who was a woman (Ambā) in his past life" (28).

In his book *Shikhandi and Other Stories They don't Tell You*, Devdutt Pattanaik has aptly summarized the life history (life and rebirth) of Ambā/ Śikhaṇḍī. Ambā was the daughter of king of Kāśī, who wanted to marry a man called Śālva. The king of Kāśī organised a *svayaṁvara* for his three daughters and the list of invitees excluded Hastināpur. An enraged Bhīṣma gate-crashed into the *svayaṁvara* and defeated all the participating princes. Bhīṣma forcefully took the three daughters to Hastināpur to get

them married to Vicitravīrya. Ambā requested that she should be allowed to marry the man of her choice and Vicitravīrya allowed her to go. Unfortunately Śālva refused to accept Ambā as his wife and gave the excuse that she had been tainted, touched by another man. Ambā came back to Hastināpur. Vicitravīrya, too, refused to accept her. Ambā then went to Bhīṣma and begged him to marry her as it was he who had brought her to Hastināpur. Bhīṣma explained to Ambā that he had taken the vow of celibacy for the whole life and he could not break it. Ambā went to all the kings of the land to seek help, but no one dared to face the anger of Bhīṣma. Ambā then approached Paraśurāma, the powerfule sage who had the reputation of killing sinful kśatriya-s and who also happened to be the teacher of Bhīṣma. Paraśurāma fought a fierce battle with Bhīṣma, but lost it at the end. In desperation, Ambā invoked Śiva. Pleased with her intense austerities, Śiva appeared before her and assured her that she would be the cause of Bhīṣma's death but only in her next life. To hasten her next life, Ambā leapt into the fire and died.

Ambā was reborn as Drupada's daughter. Drupada brought her up like a male child by training her in warfare skills. She grew up as a warrior. She was even married to a female. However, on the wedding night, when the bride discovered that her husband was a woman, Śikhaṇḍīni not Śikhaṇḍī, she ran to her father in a state of shock. Determined to avenge this insult, the bride's father, King Hiraṇyavarmana

of Daśārṇa, raised an army and threatened to invade Pañcāla (Pattanaik, *Sikhandi* 26). Confronted with her femininity for the first time in her life, Śikhaṇḍī felt responsible for this calamity. Resolving to kill herself, she went to the forest where she met a *yakṣa* called Sthuna. On hearing Śikhaṇḍī's story, Sthuna lent his manhood to Śikhaṇḍī for one night. Hiraṇyavarmana sent his courtesans for investigation, who sent back a satisfactory report. Concluding that his daughter had made a mistake, Hiraṇyavarmana apologised to Drupada and sent his daughter back (Pattanaik, *Shikhandi* 26). Later on, when the Pāṇḍava-s took on the Kaurava army in Kurukshetra, Bhīṣma proved to be the most difficult obstacle in the path of their victory. On the 10th day, on the instance of Kṛṣṇa, Śikhaṇḍī rode alongside Arjuna in his chariot. Bhīṣma lay down his bow as he wouldn't attack a woman:

> I will not strike or slay Śikhaṇḍī, the prince of Pañcāla-s, even if I behold him rushing against me in battle with weapons upraised. Having notified my god-like vow among all the kings of the earth, I shall never slay a woman or one that was formerly a woman. It may be known to you, O king, that Śikhaṇḍī was formerly a woman. Having been born as a daughter, she afterwards became metamorphosed into the male sex. (Ganguli, *Udyoga Parva*: Section CLXXIII, 334)

Bhīṣma was eliminated from the battlefield after receiving a barrage of arrows from Arjuna, standing behind Śikhaṇḍī. It is a matter of debate whether Ambā could actually take her revenge because Bhīṣma was fatally injured by Arjuna rather than Śikhaṇḍī and he died on his own terms not before the war was over. This will be taken up for analysis later in the chapter.

As explained by Custodi, a woman who wants to become a man constitutes a direct challenge to the social and political *status quo*, and her sexual transformation thus must be allayed, undermined, inauthenticated, made only temporary or outright denied (217). Ambā is "actually reborn as a female, and only effects the sexual transformation with the help of a sympathetic *yakṣa* after her guise as a male has been revealed by her bride" (217). Even then, there is some cosmic gender balance that must be maintained, for Śikhaṇḍīni only receives her masculinity at the cost of the *yakṣa*'s, who becomes female, and the swap can only be temporary, for their genders will revert back.

Custodi points out that whereas the status of Arjuna's masculinity remains ambiguous, Śikhaṇḍīni's is made explicit: her dialogue with the *yakṣa* leaves no doubt that they exchange their gender. However, even after the masculine identity of Śikhaṇḍī is reported to his father-in-law, the authenticity of his/her masculinity remains in question. After Ambā's arduous austerities and self-immolation for the sake of becoming a man,

she is re-born as a woman, re-dies as a woman, and doesn't even directly accomplish what she set out to do. Some critics point out that Ambā's vow to become a man in order to kill Bhīṣma was in a sense nullified from its inception, since Bhīṣma had the boon of being able to choose the moment of his own death – she, therefore, could only become a cause of Bhīṣma's defeat. The epic is ambivalent on whether or not to allow Ambā as Śikhaṇḍīni to be credited as the cause of Bhīṣma's death. Even more provocatively, we have an "alliance of two transsexuals against a father figure whose symbolic castration makes his own sexuality dubious" (Custodi 219).

Van Buitenen makes some interesting observations about Ambā/ Śikhaṇḍīni. First, he notes that the names of the three sisters Ambā, Ambikā, and Ambālikā are variations on the vocative *ambe/ ambā*, a hypocorism for "mother, mommy." He also notes that after Bhīṣma's initial telling of the story of Ambā/ Śikhaṇḍīni, it is pretty much forgotten, only recurring in connection with Bhīṣma's imminent death. Van Buitenen's theory is that the story of Ambā and the references to the victory of the warrior Śikhaṇḍīni over Bhīṣma are unrelated" (176–8). From this viewpoint, these are two chronologically disparate elements in the original epic material that would have been later linked as the *Mahābhārata* grew in volume over centuries so much so that these loose strands were tied up into a "tidy little knot of transsexual reincarnation" (Custodi 219). In

Ambā's two lives, we see the elements of her/his story come together in a delightfully intriguing interweaving of themes surrounding masculinity.

A closer look at Bṛhannalā and Śikhaṇḍīni would underline the fact that the 'other' sex phenomenon in the *Mahābhārata* is a biased one. First of all, as both Doniger and Goldman note, there is a dark, destructive, lethal undercurrent to Śikhaṇḍīni's female-to-male transsexuality that simply does not exist even in the deepest symbolic currents underlying Arjuna's male-to-female transsexual episode. As Goldman puts it, not only is female-to-male transsexuality "far more complicated, gradual, and overdetermined, but it also has as its purpose neither the avoidance nor the facilitation of an erotic relationship. Instead, its goal is vengeance" (391). One has noted the destructive undertones in the character of Draupadī, who never switches genders but does challenge the epic's explicit formulations of what a woman and wife should be. This current of feminine vengeance is an important strand of femininity in the *Mahābhārata*. The vengeance that hovers around the edge of Draupadī's character and the undertones of destruction that are rumbled at her birth, as well as the femininity that, though wearing a male organ for revenge, nonetheless continues to hover around Śikhaṇḍīni's masculinity breaks up the phallic signifier into pieces. As Custodi rightly points out:

> Behind the masquerade of *stṛdharma*, behind the idealized constructions of feminine sexuality embodied by the

> *apsarā*-s, behind the passivity and meek hearts consistently avowed in speech by the epic's female protagonists, there is agency, there is insistence on recognition of rights, wrongs, and some balance to be enforced, and there is an undeniable presence as a shaping force to their own lives, the course of history, and the destiny of male characters. (220)

Custodi further argues that the phallus represents a unity that is symbolically suggestive as it is impossible for subjects inhabiting a Symbolic world of law and language to fill the gaps and absences. For them the phallus stands as "an example of coherence where there exists fragmentation, of full presence where there is lack, of meaning where there is dissonance, of law where there is chaos" (221). The construction of woman's identity in this Symbolic order is independent of the overarching social phenomena as she transgresses the borders of established unities. For man, however, subjectivity is predicated upon the possession of the phallus, which functions as a master signifier that defines and bounds the realm of his subjectivity.

Goldman has brought in the Oedipal angle to gender analysis of the text as he suggests that the pervasive male fantasy of becoming a woman is really more about power relations among men: it is either a "demeaning punishment for some kind of Oedipal transgression against a powerful and

dreaded male figure or a deeply longed for metamorphosis that makes possible an erotic liaison with a powerful and desired male" (392). Therefore, any fear of woman is really "a more deeply rooted but far less explicitly stated anxiety derived from the coercive and potentially castrative power of dominant males such as fathers, older brothers, gods, gurus, a nd sages" (395), and any identification with woman is a "fantasy of sexual possession by the very father the fear of whom lies at the root of the focal anxiety centering on one's own maleness" (394). According to Goldman's Oedipal analysis, therefore, no matter how recurrent certain themes of femininity, motherhood, or female sexuality may be in the epic, it really is all about men and male relationships – or as he puts it, women are simply "a screen for a power struggle between males" (397).

The feminist objections to this line of reasoning and the conclusions he draws are probably rather obvious. Goldman's analysis completely robs the dynamic female characters of their agency. It is equally perplexing to propound that the only reason men would cross into feminine self was an Oedipal conflict with men. This is the reason why the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis fail miserably in the Indian context. The very fundamentals of their theoretical perspective are phallocentric in nature. Custodi has aptly criticized Goldman's line of thought:

> Thus, not only would I want to call out the masculinist bias in Goldman's analysis that threatens to undermine an

> otherwise rich and ground-breaking study of transsexuality in the epics, I would also want to highlight the limitations of Freudian analysis and the unfruitful paths down which it may sometimes lead us. (223)

Though many critics still believe that a Freudian analyses of the *Mahābhārata* can't be done away with altogether, they have to find better methods than Goldman's analysis admits. Desire drives all humans, though it may be channelled differently according to sexual and subjective formation. The epic is replete with plural philosophical possibilities that may show resonances in contemporary questions.

For feminists, especially the aggressive French feminists, it is counterintuitive to accept the notion that the phallus is the sole determinant and signifier of sexual difference. Luce Irigaray has done groundbreaking work in shifting philosophical and psychoanalytic dialogue toward a feminine paradigm of duality and contact. Julia Kristeva has articulated a feminine semiotic to contrast and complement Lacan's masculine Symbolic. However, Kristeva's feminine semiotic is also difficult to apply in the case of characters like Draupadī or Śikhaṇḍī. In the Western context, God is constructed as a male with whom men would form a positive father-figure sort of identification. However, in the Indian context, there are powerful female deities. Even for the male gods, the male devotee may assume a feminine position towards him. Coming from

a feminist Lacanian direction, we might also see the "act of feminization, and other examples of the desire to be female, as a fascination with and desire to occupy this position of Other that has such a profound and powerful role in the forming and sustaining of male subjectivity" (Custodi 226). Here we get a glimpse of the spiritual/mystic implications of androgyny and transsexuality in the Hindu context. Putting aside her Freudian hermeneutic of suspicion for a moment and allowing herself a more typically Hindu interpretation, Doniger writes:

> The image of the androgyny expresses with stark simplicity the problem of how one may be *separated* from god when one is united with god. As a theological image, therefore, the androgyny may represent either the bliss of union with god or the ironic agony of eternal longing for a deity with whom one is in fact consubstantial (Doniger, *Androgyny* 333).

Acoording to Doniger, the god may be androgynous (in Śiva's case) or trans-sexual (in the case of Viṣṇu as Mohinī), and the devotee may either feminize himself in an ecstatic merging with a male god (as in the Bhakti tradition) or seek to combine both male and female elements simultaneously in his body in order to experience the ecstatic sensation of the merging of god and goddess (as in the Tantric tradition). These spiritual or mystic images of androgyny or sexual transformation have

feminine erotic resonances, and they draw their ecstasy (*ex-stasis*) and enlightenment from a symbolic position that may be god, woman, or the 'other'.

The Arjuna/ Bṛhannalā episode has resonances of identification with the androgynous Śiva as well as with devotion to Kṛṣṇa. Though Śiva presides over Ambā/Śikhaṇḍīni's female-to-male transformation, however, the symbolic themes are more secular, probably because Ambā is more concerned with pursuing this-worldly privileges of the phallus rather than other-worldly *jouissance*. However, the quest for vengeance that drives Ambā/ Śikhaṇḍīni's story differentiates it from other examples of transsexuality.

The Arjuna/Bṛhannalā and Ambā/Śikhaṇḍī episodes in the *Mahābhārata*, therefore, are ways of playfully and poignantly exploring these possibilities, ways that continue to capture our imagination and challenge our intellects. Though with both Arjuna and Śikhaṇḍīni, the text offers no definite answers, it does offer more than enough material to hold our philosophical attention.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the cultural construction of gender divides human beings into men and women or masculine and feminine. In addition, there is another category of neuter gender, one who is neither a man nor a woman. These different categories create a struggle for power to get central position among all the three genders. Devdutta Pattanaik

opines that the very concept of patriarchy that men are superior to women was an invented one. Gender binaries and the concept of marriage created all the differences. The *Mahābhārata*, for example, critically refers to a pre-Mahābhārata time when there was no concept of marriage. Men and women were free to go to anyone, until it became important to establish fatherhood, for which ownership and fidelity of women became critical: "Fatherhood became important because property became important ('this is mine') and with it the idea of inheritance. Property and inheritance became important because they offered humans the delusion of immortality" (Pattanaik, *Shikhandi* 13).

The feminist's ideology that men and women are equal is already established in Hinduism as the knowledge texts point to the difference between the soul and the flesh. Again, Devdutta Pattanaik explains that the soul has no gender. Gender comes from the flesh:

> The unenlightened value the flesh, hence gender, over the soul. Such an unenlightened being values the male flesh over the female flesh, the young flesh over the old flesh, flesh encased in fair skin rather than dark skin, the property owned by that flesh, the family to which that flesh belongs, the stature of that flesh in society. The enlightened see the flesh purely in functional terms: they venerate both the *devadāsī*, who offered her body to

everyone, and the *sanyāsī*, who offered his body to no one. (Pattanaik, *Shikhandi* 13)

When the queer is pointed out in Hindu stories, they are often explained away in metaphysical terms. No attempt is made to enquire, interrogate, and widen vision. Thus queerness is rendered invisible. However, as Pattanaik rightly points out, the *hijrā* (eunuch), perhaps the most vocal manifestation of queerness in India, refuses to stay invisible. Ignored by the mainstream, often rejected by their own family, reduced to a joke in popular entertainment, they clap in the crowded streets demanding to be seen. The eunuchs challenge not just the boundaries of gender, but also the boundaries of religion, "for it is not uncommon to find a *hijrā* with a Muslim name, using Farsi words (the court language of the Mughal era), worshipping a Sufi-pir, alongside a Hindu goddess" (Pattanaik, *Sikhandi* 20).

Another example of cross-dressing and transexuality can be seen in Rabindranath Tagore's dance drama titled *Chitrangada* (1892) in which a minor character of the *Mahābhārata* has been adapted and modified as the lead character. Citrāngadā, daughter of king of Manipur has been characterised as a valiant warrior without any feminine grace. She was the heir of the king and, therefore, she was brought up and dressed up like a male child. Once she saw Arjuna and fell in love with him. However, she was afraid that her masculine appearance might not attract Arjuna

towards her. By the grace of Kāma deva she turned into a beautiful lady and Arjuna fell in love with her. In due course of time, her villages were attacked by enemies. Being the most valiant warrior of her kingdom, she returned to her masculine self and defeated the opponents. Arjuna was charmed by her valour and married her in her original form. Tagore emphasises the point that physical appearance is secondary to the *karma* and gendered roles are fluid in nature.

To conclude, women questioned the privileged position of men; thus was patriarchy challenged and feminism born. The gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgendered and inter-sexed people, cross-dressers, *hijrā*-s etc., who can not be placed in fixed categories of gender, came out in parades refusing to conform and stay invisible for the benefit of others. The postmodernism gives ample space for them to create an identity for themselves and to enter the center from the realms of peripheral outlandishness.

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Chapter 6

Gender in Modern Renditions/Interpretations of the *Mahābhārata*

The *Mahābhārata* is not only a philosophical, religious, and educational text but also a text based on the ideals of moral duty, social and cultural norms, and gender roles. One can even say that ethical or moral duties, socio-cultural norms, and gender roles are human construct. The present study concentrates on gender, which is a cultural construction rather than a universal truth. It has a socio-cultural impact. Gender, culture, and social systems have been studied from a sceptical point of view in the postmodern discourse. The feminist discourse on gender often ends up with the point of gender equality whereas the postmodern-post-feminist discourse of gender goes a step ahead and interrogates gender as a cultural construct that includes the study of men, women, and the 'other' gender. The gendered identities of masculine, feminine and the 'other' gender are deconstructed with the construction of individual identities. The postmodern study of gender and culture in contemporary creative texts, which are interpretations/ renditions of the *Mahābhārata*, will open different layers and different perceptions of gender from the ancient times to this day.

The epic *Mahābhārata* has been interpreted in various languages. The various interpretations/ renditions of the *Mahābhārata* have their own originality. The credit of the easy success and popularity of different modern interpretations of the epic goes to the timelessness of the *Mahābhārata*. Rustom Bharucha, a director, writer and cultural critic, has explained in his book, *Theatre and the World: Essays on Performance and Politics of Culture* (1992) that the *Mahābhārata* is not merely a great narrative poem. It is our "*itihāsa*, the fundamental source of knowledge of our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, statecraft, sociology, economy—in short our history in all its detail and density" (97). P. P. Raveendran, a critic, editor and translator, especially known for interpretations of texts and trends in Indian literature, has explained in an article titled "Fiction and Reception: Reconstructions of the *Mahabharata* in the Malayalam" (2009), that there are several interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* in different versions and traditions in the whole world and these interpretations have now become an integral part of the *Mahābhārata* and "no one today can read the epic in isolation of the several alternative traditions of the *Mahābhārata* myths and tales that have developed in various parts of the world in diverse forms and in diverse versions" (288). The literature and culture of a nation stand for each other and the epic *Mahābhārata* can be read as a mirror to Indian culture.

The interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* are mostly based on the contemporary scenarios that include issues related to the existing cultural, social and gender roles. Raveendran has emphatically stated at the end of the article mentioned above, "the inter-textual complexes of the *itihāsa* can be redeemed only by reconstructing the *Mahābhārata*'s letter in such a context. That, however, would demand a new way of looking at the past" (298). The interpretations of the *Mahābhārata*, therefore, provide new opportunities for the contemporary people to understand the complex history, traditions, and culture more appropriately by relating themselves to the characters and the stories.

R. C. Shah in the essay "The Mahabharata as an Inspiration for Living Literary Tradition" (1990) has explained, "A living literary tradition presupposes the twin process of re-creation and re-interpretation in any coherent society" (246). Irawati Karve writes that the scope of the *Mahābhārata* is wide ranging in time, in space and in its casting of characters: "Heroes and cowards, villains and good men, impulsive fools and wise men, ugly men and fair ones are all depicted in the course of its narrative. Almost no person is portrayed as all good or all bad" (80). The *Mahābhārata* is therefore unique in several aspects. It provides a wide scope to interpret the stories and characters in whatever way one wants to. In the atmosphere of the epic in which nothing is restricted or confined, the gender binaries are also broad. It is because of this

broadness of the epic that the various interpretations have been done and there are possibilities for thousands of more interpretations of the same.

This study concentrates on particular interpretations/ renditions of the *Mahābhārata* that are helpful in providing a broader perspective to gender studies. The interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* indicate a continuous shift towards gender studies. In several interpretations of the *Mahābhārata*, women take the central position. Women are making way into the central discourse throughout the world and the interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* are testimony to this.

The present study includes some of the interpretations that give voice to major women characters of the *Mahābhārata*, for example, Mahaswata Devi's short story, "Draupadi" (1997), Pratibha Ray's novel, *Yajnaseni* (1984), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Mitra Saoli's plays, *Five Lords, Yet none a Protector* (2005) and *Timeless Tales* (2005) and Sashi Deshpande's novella, *The Stone Women* (2000), etc. All these books are interpretations of women characters of the *Mahābhārata* by women authors. These books have mostly been interpreted or analysed as feminist texts. However, it would be wrong to read these texts under the confinement of a feminist perspective. Just because they centre on women, they cannot be labelled as feminist texts.

The different interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* mentioned above are marked by a constant shift towards a wider arena of cultural and gender studies. 'Identity' is the keyword in gender studies under postmodern perspective and the different interpretations of the *Mahābhārata* taken for study attempt to provide new identities to the marginalised gender.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

The *Mahābhārata* has been converted into a novel form by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The novel *The Palace of Illusions* stands apart with its formal and structural construction. While analysing the complexity of femininity in the *Mahābhārata,* Divakaruni has tried to study and highlight different layers of gender binaries in her novel. She retells the epic from the point of view of Draupadī. The *Mahābhārata* has a male narrator that provides a man's perspective whereas Divakaruni has given a woman's perspective in her novel. The novel reveals the inner psyche of Draupadī as a woman.

Ashok Yakkaldevi in her article, "Role of Female Identity in the Ancient Indian Stories" (2014) describes how Divakaruni's narrative appears in many ways "merely faithfully modelled on the original, but reverses the perspective by granting the reader insight into the mind of the listening Draupadī" (6). It is important to reconsider and revise several norms made by any society especially for women. Divakaruni has given

voice to Draupadī to question the cultural and gender binaries while narrating the main course of story. The author has created masculine heroes and their devoted wives and war between two families as shown in the *Mahābhārata*.

Divakaruni, in her note to the novel, explains the reason behind her decision to write this novel. She wrote that her reading of the *Mahābhārata* had compelled her to think and rethink about the limited agencies of the women characters. Although, the epic has some powerful and complex women characters that play crucial role in the main plot, women do not question or express their own views. Their silence indicates their contentment in their confined roles of a mother and a wife. Divakaruni has tried to expose through her novel the monotonous and passive lives of women that revolve around men, mostly husbands and sons. The author gives the examples of Kuntī, Gāndhārī and Draupadī in this respect.

Kuntī, after becoming a widow, gives her full dedication to the welfare of her sons. Gāndhārī, the wife of a blind king, covers her eyes in order to be equal to her husband and by doing this she renounces her power as queen and mother. Draupadī, the elegant daughter of King Drupada and the wife of five mighty heroes of the time, becomes the reason of the destruction of the third generation of men. Divakaruni says that Kuntī, Gāndhārī and Draupadī, "remained shadowy figures, their

thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons" (xiv). She finds the women characters shadowy because the epic provides one-sided picture of women in which only their external selves are revealed. Women and men are so closely related to each other in the *Mahābhārata* that there is no scope for feminists to present women as a separate group. Divakaruni ends her note with invitation to her readers to see a new Draupadī as a narrator with, "her life, her voice, her questions, and her vision" (xv).

Though Divakaruni does not talk about the title of the novel in the note, it is quite interesting to interpret the hidden meaning in the title. As the novel centres on Draupadī, the title should be related to her but the title vaguely suggests the palace of Drupada, the palace of Hastināpur or the palace of Indraprastha in which Draupadī has spent some good and bad moments of her life. The palace is illusionary, which gives a wrong perception with a deceptive appearance. The palace and its great walls perhaps symbolise the cultural and gender binaries that confine the actual identity of a human being and create illusive and fluid identities. As mentioned earlier, the author has not changed the actual course of the plot of the *Mahābhārata*; she has rather written her novel from a woman's point of view. She has experimented with the narrative technique, which

is helpful in presenting the inner psyche of Draupadī . This brings a sense of novelty to the storyline.

The first chapter titled 'Fire' introduces the heroine Draupadī in the first person narration: "Through the long, lonely years of my childhood, when my father's palace seemed to tighten its grip around me until I couldn't breathe, I would go to my nurse and ask for a story" (1). In this small extract from the novel, Draupadī explains her experience of facing the constraints of gender. The use of pronouns like, 'I', and 'me,' suggest the conscious self of Draupadī. She feels suffocated in her father's palace that 'seemed to tighten its grip.' The walls of the palace symbolise the confining taboos of gender roles that suffocate Draupadī. She talks to her nurse regarding the reason behind the grief of her father and the great silence and sadness of all other people who were present at the time of her birth. She questions the confinement of the cultural and social roles of a woman.

Draupadī's name meant the 'daughter of Drupada'. She dislikes her name since it has no significant meaning. She compares her name with that of her brother's name and says that her mind diverged to the meaning of the names their father chose, "Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Destroyer of Enemies. Draupadī, Daughter of Drupada" (5). She continues to complain about her name and asks her nurse in anger why her father could not decide a suitable name, "to a girl who was supposed to change history?" (5)

Draupadī does not love her father though she admits that her father has given her everything. She does not forgive him for the initial rejection of her as his daughter and she can not trust him either.

Draupadī of Divakaruni first questions her father's coldness on her birth and later on she questions the passivity of her husbands, who put her in humiliating condition. She is able to reveal her inner suffocated self only because she has been given voice by the author.

This Draupadī appears more powerful as she interpretes and explains each and every significant episode from her point of view. She speaks in public during her *svayaṁvara* and selects Arjuna instead of Karṇa. She stops Karṇa in the *svayaṁvara* by intervening between her brother and Karṇa's tussle regarding the eligibility of Karṇa. There is a fine description of the physical appearance of Draupadī in this scene when she speaks to Karṇa, "she stepped between her brother and Karṇa, and let fall her veil. Her face was as striking as the full moon after a cloudy month of nights. But her gaze was that of a swordsman who sees a chink in his opponent's armour and does not hesitate to plunge his blade there" (95). Divakaruni has deliberately given a bold appearance to Draupadī.

In the *Mahābhārata,* Draupadī accepted her five husbands without showing her discomfort. However, in the novel, she expresses her unhappiness to the readers on her being distributed among five brothers, "I wanted to shout, Five husbands? Are you mad? I wanted to say, I am

already married to Arjuna! But Vyāsa's prophecy recoiled upon me, robbing me of my protests" (108).

Divakaruni has highlighted the discomfort level between Draupadī and Kuntī. They had difference of opinion on several things. Kuntī's life revolves around her five sons. After the arrival of Draupadī, a woman of unique and mysterious beauty, Kuntī has to share her five sons with her. Because Kuntī did not want her sons to fight amongst each other for Draupadī, she distributed Draupadī equally between her five sons.

The awkward situation of Draupadī with her five husbands has been explained in the novel. The author has highlighted the embarrassing situations of Draupadī and her husbands while Draupadī sat closer to one of her husbands. Draupadī explained when Yudhiṣṭhira called her to sit beside him on the wooden plank, "He hesitated before putting an arm around my shoulder. The other brothers looked away, embarrassed. Were they thinking that next year, or the next, one of them would do the same to me? Better not to ponder such things" (141). The five Pāṇḍava-s manage to share Draupadī without exposing any objection or jealousy. Draupadī loved Arjuna very much and she often tried to find the same special feeling for her in Arjuna:

> The anger he'd felt at my wedding to his brothers still festered inside him, though he hid it so well that only I was aware of it. If I approached a place where he was, he

found a reason to leave it. Sometimes when he didn't know I was watching, there was a starkness on his face, the look of a man who was consumed by jealousy and hated himself for it. (141-142)

The novel explores the layers of Draupadī's character, i.e., her ways of thinking, analysing and understanding her mother-in-law and her husbands. In the *Mahābhārata* Draupadī has been portrayed as a mysterious woman with matchless beauty. Draupadī's speaking and revealing her feelings to the readers makes her character more interesting. Divakaruni's Draupadī explains with great pride that she has been appreciated by her husbands on her knowledge of governance. "More and more, Yudhiṣṭhira began to ask my advice when a tricky judgment had to be delivered. And I, having learned more of the workings of women's power, was careful to offer my opinion only in private, deferring to him always in front of others" (148). Though Draupadī is a woman, she has the ability to tackle difficult situations that Yudhiṣṭhira fails to do.

The court scene of Draupadī's *cīraharaṇa* (disrobing) remains unchanged in the novel. Draupadī explains, "I found myself in court, gathering my disordered *sāri* around me, I demanded help from my husbands. They sent me tortured glances but sat paralyzed. They felt they had no right to rescue themselves or me. My anxiety grew, but I was still not desperate" (191-192). The dialogues of Draupadī have become more

striking with the first person narration. Draupadī, in her own voice, shares her pathetic situation and the scene becomes more appealing to the readers.

The novel provides an open display of Draupadī's relation with three men, Kṛṣṇa, Karṇa and Arjuna. The novel stands apart from the *Mahābhārata* in giving space to exhibit the different relationships of Draupadī with these three men. Divakaruni has captured some minute details from the epic to explain the feelings of Draupadī. For instance, Draupadī explained that there was no limit to her grief whenever she came across her masculine husband in the most feminine form without moustache or beard in his disguise as Bṛhannalā in the last year of the exile in Virāṭa's palace: "His form was lithe and slender, draped in red silk. When he walked, his hips swayed; his smile was shy yet confident. How had his body learned these feminine subtleties? There were coral bracelets on his arms. When he asked me to braid his hair, I couldn't stop my tears" (224). The author has explained the genuine feelings of Draupadī and her grief to see her loving masculine husband possessing a feminine self.

The destruction and chaos spread due to the Mahābhārata War transformed Hastināpur into a city of women. The destruction in the war triggered a remarkable change in the character of Draupadī. After her revenge against the Kaurava-s was fulfilled, her attention shifted from her own self to other women who had lost their husbands and sons in the

War. “It was time I shook off my self-pity and did something. I resolved to form a separate court, a place where women could speak their sorrows to other women” (323). The author has empowered women by separating women as a group. Draupadī has been given opportunity to speak the story of the *Mahābhārata* in her own way and at the end women have been given the full authority and power by the author. The author brings a major change in her novel by turning Parīkṣit, the son of Abhimanyu into a daughter, who becomes the only heir to continue Pāṇḍava-s line. Thus, the authoritative power or the central position has been given to a woman that symbolises the reversal of role and governance of women on men in future. The novel ends with Draupadī’s symbolic lines:

> Above us our palace waits, the only one I’ve ever needed. Its walls are space, its floor is sky, its center everywhere. We rise; the shapes cluster around us in welcome, dissolving and forming and dissolving again like fireflies in a summer evening. (360)

Pratibha Ray’s *Yajnaseni: the Story of Draupadi*

Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi (1984) is a novel written by Pratibha Ray in Oriya and translated into English by Pradip Bhattacharaya. Like *The Palace of Illusion* of Divakaruni, Draupadī occupies the central

position in *Yajnaseni*. Draupadī is the narrator and the novel is written in first person narration. The very title *Yajnaseni* means a woman born out of fire. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā, born out of the earth, is an epitome of calmness, sacrifice, and patience. Whereas Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata,* born out of fire, is an exemplification of fire, anger and impatience. Sītā hides all her anguish and grief and ultimately goes back to the mother earth but Draupadī exhibits her grief and takes her revenge. But Pratibha Ray in her novel has released Draupadī from the image of a revengeful woman. In a review titled "The Novels of Pratibha Ray" (2013), Prafool Kumar Mohanty has talked of 'humanist feminism' as the basic approach of the novel *Yajnaseni.* Draupadī represents a modern woman who has her own identity. Ray has said in her interviews that Draupadī is a representative of a kind of 'humanist feminist' who does not have the rigidity or resentment of the French poststructuralist feminism of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irrigaray. The Draupadī of Ray is in the, "tradition of the classical feminine as envisaged by Vyāsa and other Vedic philosophers: yet she is sophisticated, knowledgeable, well-versed in fine arts, warfare, and even the dice game. She is magnanimous and self-eschewing, almost transcending the milieu which she inherits" (38). Draupadī has been presented in the novel with all the virtues expected in an ideal woman. She is cultured, knowledgeable, benevolent and sacrificing.

Draupadī is feminine, feminist, and a humanist at the same time unlike the Draupadī presented in the epic *Mahābhārata* and the novel *The Palace of Illusion*. Draupadī has been given a new face. She has been presented as a victim of the male dominated society. She plays the role of a woman who is forced to marry five men, who is being insulted due to her elder husband's mistake, who has to spend most of her life in the forest and who loses her five sons in the war. Draupadī, therefore, represents a woman who worships her husbands in spite of all her insults and gets nothing in life except pain and humiliation.

By giving a pitiable self to Draupadī, Ray wants to position her as one of the most tragic heroines ever created. Mohanty further explains the character of Draupadī in the review of the novel: "Pratibha uses the epic facts and modulates them with modern feminine outlook to make her our contemporary" (39). In the Indian patriarchal system during the 1980s, women were not allowed to speak their heart and they walked silently on the directions provided by their father, brother or husband. Pratibha Ray's Draupadī has also followed the path selected for her by the men around her. She is aware of herself being used but she is helpless. Unlike the *Palace of Illusion* and the *Mahābhārata*, in Ray's novel, Draupadī remains silent in her *savayṁvara* and her brother rejects Karṇa, and she repents on what her brother did. In the *Palace of Illusion*, Divakaruni gives some space to Draupadī's love for Arjuna and Karṇa. Ray provides some

meetings of Draupadī with Karṇa and Kṛṣṇa in which Draupadī's love for both the men comes out. Draupadī at first wished to marry Kṛṣṇa, then she wished to marry Karṇa but she had to marry Arjuna on Kṛṣṇa's behest:

> The garland that I had been weaving since the morning to put round Kṛṣṇa's neck would have to be put around Arjun's neck.... Did I have no wish of my own? No desire? No craving? ... My birth, life and death all were directed by someone else. Why had I come and why should I remain alive? Why should I die? What was their intention? I knew nothing. (24)

Draupadī has raised many questions regarding the confinement of her feminine self. She expresses her grief that she has not been given the right to take the decisions of her own life. In the above quoted lines of the novel, Draupadī appears a fragile woman. On the one hand, she is playing her feminine role in the confinement of her gender and on the other hand, she is raising questions against the rigidity of gender binaries and patriarchal hegemony that seize her rights as a human being. She understands that she will have to fight for her self-respect, her identity, and position but she finds herself helpless. She further exclaims with grief, "As an ignorant infant, I should play with whatever toy my master places in my hand! Be happy and go on living. Who was I to ask who would be my toy and why?" (24). Ray has emphasised that Draupadī has been used

by the men since her birth. Everyone who entered in her life has considered her nothing but a toy or a doll without human flesh and blood. Her own choice, her need, her voice, her identity have been denied continuously by everyone at every stage of her life.

In the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī is known for her mysticism and revengefulness. But Ray has portrayed Draupadī as an innocent and pious woman who has to suffer due to her confined gendered role. She is not able to decide anything for her own life and she is helplessly following the accepted gender and moral diktats and walking on the path chosen by men. She easily captures the mind and heart of the modern readers and creates much space for further interrogation of gender binaries.

There is a general understanding of Draupadī as a woman who catalyzed the Mahābhārata war and therefore she is not supposed to be a voiceless woman. Ray has discarded all the negative connotations of the character of Draupadī. In the year 1993, Pratibha Ray was presented the Bharatiya Jnanpith's prestigious ninth Moortidevi Award for this novel.

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

Mahasweta Devi's short story "Draupadi" (1987) is set in a system of hierarchy in which there is a group of tribal people fighting against the government for their rights and survival. These tribes are marginalised and the women in their group are doubly marginalised. The story captures

the struggle of a tribal woman addressed by two names, Dopdi and Draupadi Majhen. She is involved in the naxalite movement and lives in the Sharkhani forest with other naxalite rebels. The background that the author provides is in itself quite conflicting. The politics of power pervades the text as men and women fight for their existence, for their freedom and right. In this situation, the very condition of naxalite women is being exposed. They are suppressed because of class, caste, and gender. The women who are a part of the naxal groups have to suffer physically and emotionally.

The story is, therefore, quite sensitive and based on a serious and actual picture of caste and gender disparity in India. The translator of the story, Spivak suggests that the story should not be read as a distortion of the ancient epic. The central character of the story Dopdi represents the Draupadī of the *Mahābhārata* in the modern circumstances and conditions. Spivak writes, "it would be a mistake, I think, to read the modern story as a refutation of the ancient. Dopdi is as heroic as Draupadi" (9). In an article titled "Archetypal Deconstruction in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi" (2014), Rajni Dwivedi has explained that the force of the story lies in its "grounding in the Hindu mythology of gender subaltern's body, the female body which is never questioned and only exploited" (241).

Mahasweta Devi has presented Dopdi as a fighter who has to suffer due to her sexuality and gender. By covering her body, a woman preserves her honour, her purity, and dignity. In the story, when the tribal woman Dopdi is undressed and gang raped by the police officials, she loses her weaknesses with her bare body. She had been uncovered and brutally raped in such a way that no piece of cloth can cover her body. This act of gang rape and the nakedness of her body made her more powerful then she was. She exhibited her wounds and blood to the General (Senanayak) when she was brought to tent in the morning. Draupadi stood up before the Senanayak in some pieces of clothes on her body. Tearing the piece of cloth from her body with her teeth, Draupadi walked in bright sunlight with her head high towards the Senanayak. The Senanayak had never seen such a sight; he became horrified and shocked to see Draupadi:

> He is about to cry, but stops. Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds. What is this? He is about to bark. Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says the object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up; don't you want to see how they made me? (402)

After being raped for several nights Dopdi does not die or become silent. She rather speaks, roars, and questions the masculinity of the men

who have raped her. She has no feminine self or female body now and she questions the Senanayak if he has the masculinity to break her any more. Comparing the tribal Dopdi to the Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata,* one thing becomes clear that both of them had to face insult and humiliation due to their feminine body. In the story, the major point that Mahasweta Devi has exposed is the politics of sexuality or the politics over women's body. In the *Mahābhārata*, an attempt was made to undress Draupadī in the court. She was saved by the miracle of Kṛṣṇa but in this story, no one comes to save Dopdi when she is undressed and raped by the police, who are supposed to protect the people. This incident is different from the epic and this difference indicates the change of the time and strengthening of gender and sexual discrimination.

Belonging to a tribal community and being a woman, raising voice and fighting is something unbearable for the patriarchal system. The gender and sexual binaries are more oppressive for a woman like Dopdi as she herself says in the story, "Your sex is a terrible wound" (28). Anju Bala, has written in her article, "Silence No More: A Study of Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi" that the most important question that this text poses is "not only why Dopdi was raped, but it also analyses why women fall as an easy prey to be raped? Through this story, the author challenges the "commodification" and "subsequent victimization" of a woman's body" (3).

Bala has explained that Mahasweta Devi has presented an example for women to be fearless and fight for their rights instead of accepting their rape as an end of their life and bearing the insult with silence. Women who are raped or insulted by men should not keep silent and hide themselves from the society or to commit suicide, they should rather raise their voice so that the victimizer would be afraid and feel guilt for the crime.

Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata* questions the masculinity of both, those who have tried to undress her and those who have become silent spectators. There is a notion that a woman is physically weak and vulnerable. Whenever a woman tries to do something out of her assigned gender and sexual roles, she has always been pushed back by men by exposing and playing with her feminine body to remind her of being physically weaker and helpless. The purity of her body is crucial for her survival. After being raped, she has nothing to survive for on this earth. Mahasweta Devi has tried to deconstruct this notion through the character of Draupadī. The gender binaries and the sexuality of women have been made so much important for women that they fail to survive in case of being raped or being exposed to compromising positions in the society. Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi," therefore, gives a strong message to the women that they should fight for themselves alone and break all the

sexual and gender restrictions so that their body would no longer be considered as an object to be used by men.

The Stone Women and Other Stories by Shashi Deshpande

The Stone Women (2000), a collection of short stories by Shashi Deshpande, aims to create awareness in both men and women towards their gender roles that they are religiously following. Manjari Shukla has discussed elaborately in her article, "Scratching the Labels: A Feminist Reading of Shashi Deshpande's Select Short Stories" (2014), that the emergence of short story happened in Pre-Independence period but it was established as a dominant mode of writing after 1960s. The stories in those days were written in conventional style. A change in the pattern was required. In this scenario, Deshpande's writing appeared as a fresh air that questioned the cultural and social politics of gender and exposed the society, largely governed by males. Deshpande considers the development of both men and women out of the rigid conceptualisation of gender and sexuality. Nirmala Prakash in her article titled "From Feminine to Feminist Consciousness: Sashi Deshpande's *The Stone Women*" (2004) argues that women's writings largely give the true picture of women as their writings give central position to women.

Sashi Deshpande has captured the identity crisis of women in her works. Her work, *The Stone Women,* as the very title suggests, offers central position to women in all the stories. The women characters in the stories are mythological, taken mostly from the *Mahābhārata*. The title of the collection has been taken from the first story. Women are playing their feminine roles and they are voiceless, passive, and vulnerable. The sculptural designs have been described in the story by the narrator that suggests the male perception of female body, "They're women lush-bodied, high breasted, women carved on rectangular stone panels, leaving provocatively out of them, towards us, it seems. Women in all kinds of poses - looking into the mirror, doing their hair, playing with musical instruments, dancing, hunting, I walk along looking at them mesmerized" (11). Women are identifying themselves through the eyes of men and they appear satisfied. The narrator of the story is shocked to see "the joyous, playful, narcissistic existence of these women" (11). The feminine selves of the mythological women have been seen through the eyes of a feminist narrator of the story.

The first story "The Stone Woman" sets the tone for the other stories of the book based on different mythological women characters. "The Inner Room" is the story of Ambā. The story highlights the transformation of a feminine Ambā into a feminist who questions the patriarchal system and rejects her life under the dominance of men. In the same way "And What

has been Decided?" is a story based on Draupadī. There are stories based on Kuntī, Gāndhārī, etc., and in every story the author highlights the journey of a feminine woman into a feminist one.

Prakash further highlights in the article mentioned above that there is no doubt that tolerance, love, kindness and faithfulness are widely acknowledged traits of women, but self-assertion is not to be viewed as contrary to these values. Shashi Deshpande presents feminists out of her women characters, "She brings to surface the protesting and defiant aspects of their character. The context, figures and situations are mythological but the responses and reactions of her protagonists are akin to those of contemporary women" (Prakash 37). Prakash concludes the article by explaining the author's concern towards the importance of understanding mythological women through her stories. The female characters in these stories are placed in difficult situations. They are torn between the self and society. Shashi Deshpande's book is a sincere attempt at "revisiting her mythological sisters and tap their feminine consciousness from an awkward women's point of view" (Prakash 40).

There can also be a postmodern post-feminist perspective to the stories. The author has presented a cultural study of gender from past to present with a sceptical point of view in which the inner selves of the women characters are awakened and they fight to establish their identity out of their restricted gender roles.

Mitra Saoli's *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* and *Timeless Tales*

Five Lords Yet None a Protector (2005) and *Timeless Tales* (2006) are two plays based on the *Mahābhārata* by Saoli Mitra, a Bengali actress born and brought up under the influence of the technicality of a theatre artist. These plays were originally written in Bengali titled *Nathaboti Anathaboth* and *Katha Amritasaman* and translated into English as *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* and *Timeless Tales* by Ipshita Chanda, Rita Datta and Moushumi Bhowmik.

In the "Forward" to the plays, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, an Indian poet and novelist, has explained that the play *Five Lords Yet None a Protector* is the first modern Bengali play to give a feminist interpretation to the characters of the *Mahābhārata.* Mitra has accomplished an incredible task of writing a play, directing it and acting in it, single handedly. In both the plays, Mitra has worked as "an author, a director, an actor, a singer and a dancer, and excelling in each role. She has combined several genres and a variety of literary styles to express herself fully in these plays, using prose, poetry and music, folk style and classical style, with urban and rural dialect" (Datta XI).

Saoli has chosen some of the important episodes of the *Mahābhārata* related to some major characters. With her multiple talents she makes the characters alive before the audience and the readers. Both plays are

performed by a single young woman (Saoli Mitra) who narrates the story and plays different roles by adding her own comments.

The play *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector* presents the episode of Draupadī's humiliation and her firmness and her standing on her own to protect herself in front of her five weak and silent husbands: "Married to valiant lords, yet none a protector. Such is the fate of Drupad's darling daughter. Unbearable pain and bitterness are all that life brought her. Married to valiant lords, yet none a protector" (Datta 63).

The woman narrator questions the masculinity of the five husbands who left their wife to fight alone. It is because of Draupadī's distribution among the five brothers that she faces the most insulting moment of her life. If she had been the wife of Arjuna only, nothing would have happened to her. The silence of Arjuna was painful for Draupadī as she loved him. Arjuna gave his support and loyalty to his brother and left Draupadī alone to fight.

In the play, Draupadī questions her husbands as to how they played on her in the game of the dice as they had lost themselves before they lost her. A fundamental question is raised here: does a woman lose her selfhood after getting married to a man? The answer of Draupadī is no. A woman has all the right to question her husband's wrong decisions. Yudhiṣṭhira lost himself in the dice game after losing his brothers. The brothers showed no objection and became slaves of Duryodhana.

However, Draupadī was not present when she was being played upon in the game. This brings into question the hegemony of patriarchal system in which a woman is supposed to be her husband's property that he can sell in need. The *kathak* remarks: "Draupadi, the King's beloved daughter, became the property of the Pandavas" (24)! Saoli Mitra has therefore exposed the irrationality of the situation in which a woman is not supposed to be human being but a mere property of her husband.

The play highlights the actual selves of Indian men and women dominated by the discourses of gender and sexuality. Mitra conveys through her play that the female body, her mind and her heart have been continuously controlled and trained and framed to be submissive and dutiful to men, whether a father, brother, or husband.

In the play *Timeless Tales*, Mitra has taken the tragic stories of some of the chief characters from the *Mahābhārata.* It presents a mature interpretation of the stories from the *Mahābhārata.* The play narrates the lives of some of the significant characters like, Satyavatī, Ambā, Ambīkā and Ambālikā, Kuntī, Gāndhārī, Draupadī, Subhadrā, Kṛṣṇa and Karṇa, etc. The play also displays the darker sides of the Kurukshetra War and the helplessness of human beings before their destiny.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen has compared Saoli Mitra with Iravati Karve. Sen argues that Saoli, like Karve, has given importance to humanity in her play, *Timeless Tales*. The *Timeless Tales* does not concentrate on the issue

of gender alone; it rather deals with the moral and ethical values of humanity, the destruction of War and the consequences of greed. In *Timeless Tales*, the author has presented the darker side of the epic War: "The War lasted for eighteen days and created complete chaos and annihilation. She (Saoli Mitra) has compared the demolition of the Mahābhārata War to the hard times that the world is passing through today" (Datta X).

Saoli's creativity and her originality lie in her multi-tasking and her interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* in the genre of a play. She has relived and enacted the lives of the major characters of the epic. Both the plays can be read in continuation. The plays are appealing to the contemporary audience and readers. They provide feministic and humanistic perspectives as mentioned in the the "Forward" to the plays by Nabaneeta Dev Sen.

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You*

Devdutt Pattanaik has dared to collect stories from Indian mythologies on queerness. The queer stories might have been less mentioned and discussed. The context of queerness in Indian mythology is quite different from that of the west and the stories from the *Mahābhārata* give a testimony to this. There are different reasons behind the change of sex and cross dressing by Śikhaṇḍī and Arjuna and others in the *Mahābhārata*.

Pattanaik, therefore, through his collection of the queer stories from Indian mythologies, provides the Indian perspective of queerness before the Indian and the Western readers. In the beginning of the book, there is a kind of introduction to queerness titled as "Appreciating Queerness." In the appreciation of queerness, the author highlights the politics of body, "I have a man's body. I accept this body. I offer it to everyone. I have a woman's body. I accept this body. I offer it to everyone. I have a man's body. I reject this body. I desire no one. I have a woman's body. I reject this body. I desire no one. I do not know if my body is a woman's or a man's. I feel I am a woman" (10).

The gender binaries have been deliberately shaken with the above quoted lines. An individual can have his/her feelings or desires to accept or reject certain moral or cultural taboos. The above quoted lines also indicate the possibility of a man feeling like a woman and a woman feeling like a man or one can feel neither like a man nor like a woman. The desires and feelings of a man or a woman have nothing to do with the social norms of sex and gender.

Pattanaik has explored the concept of queerness in the world in the first part of the book. The chapter is titled as "The Discovery and Innovation of Queerness." Hinduism is so grand that it covers all the universal philosophies of life. It gives importance to one's soul and not the flesh. With the concept that the human soul has no gender as gender is

related to one's flesh, Hinduism has solved the issue of the equality of men and women that is the major agenda of the feminists. The author talks about an enlightened self that "sees the flesh purely in functional terms: they venerate both the *devadāsī,* who offered her body to everyone and the *sanyāsī*, who offered his body to no one. Women were told to be chaste: it granted them magical powers, protection against widowhood" (13).

The gender studies of the present time have been broadened with the study of queer theory and the book *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You* provides a variety of stories from the Indian mythologies in which queerness appears to be an acceptable part of life. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the title of the book has been taken from one of the characters of the *Mahābhārata*, Śikhaṇḍī who changes her sex from a woman into a man.

The book *Postmodern Encounters: Foucault and Queer Theory* by Tamsin Spargo presents the functioning of the word 'queer' as a noun, an adjective or a verb, but in each case it is defined against the 'normal' or normalising. The deconstruction of the sexual and gender binaries by creating a new identity (gay, Lesbian) has not been acceptable in Indian society. Tamsin Spargo further explains the complexity of queer theory that is not "a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological

framework, but a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender and sexual desire" (10).

The book *Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You* consists of total 30 stories. "Shikhandi, who became a man to satisfy her wife" is the story of Ambā who is called Śikhaṇḍī in her next birth. Pattanaik has narrated all the episodes related to the life of Ambā/Śikhaṇḍī in this story. The Story "Arjuna, Who was Temporarily Castrated for Showing Restraint" talks about the episode of Arjuna and Urvaśī and Arjuna's disguise as a woman in the court of king Virāṭa. To sum up, *Shikhandi and Other Tales they don't tell you* is a collection of queer stories that intend to deconstruct one's concept of gender and sexuality and provide a broader perspective. The author has concluded the first part of the book "Appreciating Queerness" with the following lines that sums up that nature is more powerful than culture:

To appreciate this fluidity of nature

And the shifting rigidities of culture

Is to appreciate queerness. (10)

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

The Great Indian Novel (1989) is a satirical novel based on the epic *Mahābhārata* written by Shashi Tharoor. The background of the novel

is the Indian Freedom movement. The novel is written in first person narration and Veda Vyāsa, the counterpart of Shashi Tharoor, is the narrator. The novel starts with the Veda Vyāsa choosing Gaṇeśa to write his experience since birth and the *Mahābhārata* story goes parallel with the Indian history. Unlike the other two novels discussed above, *The Palace of Illusions* and *Yajnaseni*, *The Great Indian Novel* is narrated and written by a man from a man's point of view. The historical figures like Gandhi, Nehru, Bose, etc., are transformed into characters taken from the epic.

Tharoor has given a special role to one of the less mentioned women in the *Mahābhārata,* Duśalā, the only daughter of Dhṛtarāṣṭra (Nehru) called in the novel as Priya Duryodhani, representing Indira Gandhi. Duśalā, the neglected daughter of Dhṛtarāṣṭra had been portrayed in the novel as a woman who was not confident of her feminine beauty. She struggles to be equal to her hundred brothers and transforms herself into an ambitious, violent, and cruel woman. In the novel, the character of Draupadī personifies democracy. The birth of democracy after Independence is like the birth of Draupadī. Gandhi represents Bhīṣma of the *Mahābhārata*. He dies with the bullet of Nathuram Godse who is the counterpart of Śikhaṇḍī. The satirical novel is written in 18 books.

B. R. Chopra's *Mahābhārata* (1988)

Among the TV adaptations of the *Mahābhārata*, only B. R. Chopra's 1988 TV serial telecast on Doordarshan is faithful to the original text of Veda Vyāsa. The powerful dialogues and script composed by Dr. Rahi Masoom Reza and Pandit Narendra Sharma have coupled with superb acting, costumes, and direction have made this TV adaptation immortal. Mythological stories are always a part of the collective consciousness of the masses, but the popularity of the *Mahābhārata* in the contemporary generation in India owes largely to this TV serial.

Rahi Masoom Reza has stuck to the original storyline of the text without manipulating the ethos of the epic for making it consumer-friendly, as is the case with all the later visual adaptations of the *Mahābhārata*. The construction of gender in the serial is poignant, especially the epidode of Draupadi's *cīrharaṇa*, which brought tears into the eyes of the viewers with its visual effects.

To conclude, all the modern renditions of the *Mahābhārata* contribute towards a better understanding of the myriads of issues raised in this epic. The adaptations are crucial for offering diverse viewpoints towards an understanding of this cultural text.

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Chapter 7

Conclusion

The *Mahābhārata* is such a broad and multidimensional cultural and historical epic that the biggest challenge lies in coming to a conclusion about the construction of gender in it. One cannot deny the possibilities of having different hypothesis regarding the symbols of masculine, feminine and the 'other' gender in the *Mahābhārata*. Although at the first glance one may find that the women and men in the text are supposedly playing their feminine and masculine roles, the inside picture reveals that nothing is a universal truth in the rigidness of gender categories in the text. The gendered identity has rather been challenged constantly.

The thesis provides a new outlook towards gender studies on the *Mahābhārata* . The thesis calls for the necessity to revive our ancient culture that is not biased against anyone gender. Gender is a socio-cultural construct and culture is a dynamic entity. Culture of any country opens its windows for new adaptations. Unfortunately, in order to adopt things from other cultures from other countries, the Indian culture is losing its significance and uniqueness, as the new generation is largely ignorant about India's own cultural roots found in the great epic like the *Mahābhārata*, a testimonial text that conveys the richness, diversities, and greatness of the Indian culture. In recent times, Western influence has

affected the youth so much so that they are least concerned to know about the affluence of a socio-cultural and historical text like the *Mahābhārata*.

The study of gender from postmodern-postfeminist perspectives sums up the broadness and multiplicities of the Indian culture represented in the *Mahābhārata*. The gendered roles have been disentangled and denounced at different points in the *Mahābhārata.* Men and women in the text are good and bad at the same time. Everyone has to face the consequences of his/her mistakes.

The basic roles assigned to women in the Indian context are completely different from the Western context. For instance, the western feminists have argued that men try to subvert a woman to the marginalised position by making her a mother. However, in Indian context there is no position that is superior to the position of a mother. Motherhood is very significant in the *Mahābhārata* and mothers in the text occupy very powerful and authoritative position. The characters of Satyavatī, Kuntī, and Gāndhārī are the best examples of women who are emotionally and spiritually stronger than men and are known for their motherhood. What makes a woman special and exceptional in Indian society is her motherhood. The identity of a mother was crucial in the ancient times, it is crucial at present, and undoubtedly, it shall remain crucial in future as well.

Although the basic identity of women like Satyavatī, Kuntī, Gāndhārī, Draupadī, and Ambā is associated with their relation with men, they are in no way inferior to men. The women are feminine but their femininity is differently defined. They do not conform to the basic characteristics of feminine behaviour of being voiceless and passive in any way. The women of the *Mahābhārata* win battles of words, not swords: "The representation of a female figure winning a debate, which is a battle of words, arguably works as a more imitable model than the representation of a female winning a battle with weapons (Vanita 91).

All the minor episodes concerned with women characters in the epic represent the micro-narratives of their identity construction. The narrative breaks the overarching grand narrative into small pieces that allows women to garner a pivotal position in the plot. All the powerful and mighty warriors like Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Arjuna, and Bhīma are relegated to peripheral positions by the cumulative effect of these micro-narratives.

Kevin Belting in an article "Gender, Identity and the *Mahābhārata*" (2011) opines that identity itself is not reliant on gender, and that this ancient Indian text in many ways bucks established gender roles and, more importantly, challenges the very notion of gender itself (1). Kevin Belting has compared the *Mahābhārata* women with the women of Greek classics. He explains that the women in the *Mahābhārata* are different

because they use their “feminine power” to assert themselves to enhance their roles as queens and matriarchs (6).

The women in the epic are invested with matchless will power and self-determination. For example, Gāndhārī spends her whole life like a blind woman, Ambā committees suicide for taking another birth, Draupadī displays her self-determination and a strong will power by keeping hair unbraid for thirteen long years. Towards the end of the epic battle, she completes her vow by washing her hair with the blood of Duḥśāsana.

Draupadī in the epic rips apart a misnomer that the virtuous and pious woman in the Indian tradition is bereft of aggressive behaviour. The aggression that is often associated with valour is transformed into a potent weapon of resistance by Draupadī. The phallogocentric charade of chivalry is deconstructed by a hyperactive and forthright retaliatory resistance against the parochial male centric worldview of ancient India. The idea of passive resistance has no place in Draupadī’s worldview.

There is no doubt that women are equal to men in nearly all the fields in the 21st century India. The physical weakness of a woman is no longer her identity. A woman cannot be dominated by men because both men and women have their stronger and weaker selves. In the *Mahābhārata*, there are examples where men treat the female body as an object of desire, but the retaliation by women against such advances is exemplary. Jayadratha tried to abduct Draupadī forcefully and Kīcaka

tried to seduce her. Both of them had to face the consequences. Draupadī's disrespect in the court during the game of dice is perhaps the most compelling reason behind the Mahābhārata war. Draupadī raises her voice and fights for her self-respect. For the present generation females, the *Mahābhārata* paves a path towards empowerment and enlightenment. The *Mahābhārata* affirms the reverent position of women in the Indian society. The thesis raises a question for feminism per se. It is high time we revise the aggressive and radical perspectives adopted by feminists worldover and come up with a new outlook essential in Indian context.

The chapter on Arjuna and Śikhaṇḍī provides a conclusive insight towards the understanding of the gender categories of masculine, feminine and the 'other' gender. Both Arjuna and Śikhaṇḍīni change themselves into the feminine and masculine selves respectively in order to accomplish their mission. Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough in the book *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (1993) have explained that in any society it would be wrong to associate one's masculinity and femininity to one's biological differences. Cross-dressing and change of gender are not new in the Indian culture. A fine example of this queerness is the Ardhanārīśvara form of Śiva, which opens new insights into these aspects of gender:

> Śiva, one of the three gods of Hindu pantheon, for example, is sometimes represented in sculptures and

> paintings as Ardhanārīśvara, a hermaphroditic god fused halfway into the form of his spouse Pārvatī, or alternatively as a hermaphrodite with female elements on his left side and male on the right. (Bullough 6)

Here the example of Śiva can be taken as a representation of masculine and feminine in one self and not two. This example suggests two things strongly. Firstly, there is existence of equally powerful masculine and feminine forms of gender in every human being irrespective of the biological differences. Secondly, the Indian concept of marriage considers wives as *ardhāṅginī* (better half of the male) similar to the concept of Ardhanārīśvara, which represents the half body of Śiva and half of body Pārvatī joined together in one body.

Finally, the postmodern postfeminist approach underlines the following characteristics of gender in the *Mahābhārata*: (i.) The gender binaries are not rigid. (ii.) The masculine and feminine roles are made for men and women but men and women are not bound to maintain those roles. (iii.) Gender is a matter of perception; it is not the truth or reality of life. (iv) Cultural signifiers are liberating agencies that allow the coercive system to be challenged. (v) The female characters of the *Mahābhārata* determine the course of the story rather than meekly following their destiny.

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