

# REPRESENTING MASCULINITY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**REPRESENTING MASCULINITY: AN EXPLORATION OF THE MAHĀBHĀRATA**”, submitted by **Deepak Rawat**, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** of the University, is to the best of my knowledge an original work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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*For*  
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*All errors and omissions are mine alone.*

*J.N.U.,  
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## EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS USED

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2. JAB. Van Buitenen, 1973-78. *The Mahābhārata*. 3 vols. Chicago: Chicago University press.
3. M.N.Dutt(trans), 1997. *A-Prose English Translation of the M.B.* 7 Vols. Parimal publications: Delhi.
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## INTRODUCTION

The central concern of this work is to explore various representations of masculinity and male sexuality as depicted in the *Mahābhārata (Mbh.)*. The focus will be on how masculinity intersects with gender, caste and other elements of society in complex ways. In short, the work seeks to integrate masculinity with a more complex and extensive field of power relations. Previous studies on gender in ancient India have had little to say on the representations of male gendered behaviour. This work contends that it is important to veer from the emphasis on femininity and womanhood when addressing questions of gender. It refuses to treat categories such as 'men' and 'masculinity' as undifferentiated and essentialised. Thus, it stresses on the discursive and social constructedness of masculinity.

### *Theorising masculinity*

Why are males masculine and females feminine? (Habbard 1993: 426). It is generally believed that biological sex, gender roles, and masculine and feminine psychological characteristics are intimately bound. However, the issue demands greater conceptual clarity. Femininity and masculinity in a social or psychological sense, are distinguished from male and female sex in a biological sense.

Concepts of the nature of femininity and masculinity are varied and have changed over the past several centuries (Maccoby 1987: 23). There are no necessary differences in traits and temperaments between the sexes. Rather, they result from differences of socialisation and the cultural expectations held from each sex (Mead 1935). In other words, ideas of masculinity and femininity are inherently, derived from and tied to the social structure. Masculine and feminine identities, are then, built upon the gender schema supplied by the society (Maccoby 1987: 33).

The social reproduction of gender in individuals sustains the gendered societal order; as individuals act out the expectations of their gender status in face to face interaction, they are constructing gender, and, at the same time gendered systems of dominance and power. In most societies, women and men are not only perceived as different but are also differently evaluated; and these supposed differences in characteristics and capabilities justify the power differences between them. As Joan Wallach Scott (1988:42) puts it, “Gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is the primary way of signifying relationships of power”. The point needs to be underscored that unlike sex, which is an assumed biological fact; gender is a social construction.



Society constructs masculinity as a bearer of power and subjugates femininity to maintain the dominance of that power through patriarchy. Thus, roles are designated and not natural. Derrida in particular accented the constructed nature of the subject and the crucial role played by binary opposites in this construction (Feder 1996:3). He suggests that the whole of Western thought is structured in terms of binary oppositions. One of these terms is always privileged over the other. This privileging of terms is called logocentrism (McQuillan 2000:12). Our task should be to undo the binary oppositions upon which logocentrism is predicated. In this way, the binary will be shown to be a false opposition working to serve a particular set of interests. Derrida suggests that even the most rigorously pure identity cannot help but be hybrid, because ultimately all identity depends upon the construction of limits which must, by their nature be permeable. Thus, any identity is always already haunted by the other it seeks to exclude (*ibid.*22).

The masculine realm takes on a more highly valued character than the feminine, because men must affirm their masculinity by denying and denigrating the female (Young 1997: 28). But how do masculinities operate? They function by promoting certain characteristics as masculine and making these characteristics the criteria for full membership in polities and societies. This means, that the feminine, to maintain social relations based on male power, must be constructed as socially subordinate to the masculine. These constructions not only figure women as 'other', but also

produce difference itself as feminine. Cultural conceptions of bodies have been among the major vehicles of masculinities (Phelan 1999: 53,57). Masculine sexuality typically defends itself by splitting the woman into two: the nursemaid and the mother; the whore and the virgin, while taking itself for granted as a stable unitary and self-evident reality (Forrester 1990: 50), (Felski 1999: 92).

However, now it is being argued –and even I stick to this position– that rather than a single masculinity, there are multiple masculinities that vary across space, time, and context (Lentin 1997: 51-52). Issues of masculinity never operate in a vacuum, and are deeply implicated in other categories. Masculinity, then, can be seen as a significant pointer along which power is exercised. It also serves as a useful category of analysis by which relations of power are constructed and represented in society (Sinha 1995: 1,12).

### *The beginning of men's studies*

The study of men as gendered beings has assumed importance in relatively recent times. This perspective has proved extremely useful both in terms of theoretical insights, as well as in terms of elaborate empirical studies. However, this doesn't mean that no thinking had gone into it until recent times.

The problematization of men and masculinity and their development as research topics began after the Second World War (Hearn 1987: 30). Andrew Tolson (1977:113) argued for the world war experience and the subsequent post-imperialism in producing a 'crisis of masculinity'. However, even before the Second World War, some serious thinking had started on the nature and construction of masculinity. Margaret Mead's (1935) work established that all aspects of sex and gender are highly variable culturally, and are largely products of cultural definitions.

It was in the mid 1970's, that both social theorists and historians came to see the significance of the analysis of men's gendered behaviour. The impact of second-wave feminist theory was profound during the emergence of men's studies as a separate domain within the broader study of gender during the 1970's. Joe Dubbert's (1979) work tried to incorporate masculinity into the study of history by analysing the US Frontier of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He studied the role of both 19<sup>th</sup> century racial theories and popular culture in the creation of models of male behaviour. Other such works (Bell 1982; Strauss 1982) established masculinity as a culturally and historically constructed phenomenon.

Strauss examined men's role in first wave feminist campaigns for female struggle in the U.S. and Britain. This study focussing on the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, presented that period as being crucial to the

construction of modern dominant masculinity. Mangan and Walvin's (1987) edited work reached the same conclusion, and placed the Victorian concept of manliness at the centre of the social reproduction of dominant masculinity. Allen Warren's chapter on Baden Powell tried to draw connections between scouting, imperialism and manliness. This volume is important because it tried to locate dominant masculinity in its socio-political and ideological context.

Arthur Brittain (1989) again presented masculinity as a historical construct. He saw the 1890's as a period of 'crisis in masculinity', because of men's ambivalent reaction to first – wave feminism, and the changing definitions of femininity. The need for a gendered study of men's lives was accentuated by Carnes and Griffin (1990). They examined law and printing apprentices in the Victorian era as masculine professions. Margaret Marsh's (1990) work dealing with suburban men brought out the changing definitions of masculinity and domesticity in the late Victorian period.

However, it was Michael Roper and John Tash's (1991) collection that espoused a strong need for historicizing masculinity and discarding essentialist concepts. They asserted that masculinity is subject to change and varied in its forms. Seidler (1994) has tried to examine the relationship between masculinity and social theory, and suggests that in western epistemology reason has largely been described in masculine terms. Seidler

shows how dominant forms of masculinity have helped shape prevailing forms of knowledge, culture and experience.

The theoretical understanding of masculinity has been vastly increased as a result of the works of 'feminist linguists'. Their stand is that masculinity and femininity co-exist in the same person, hence, they should be seen, not as polar natural opposites, but as separate dimensions (Vodak 1997: 3). For Butler, gender is performative (1990:33)<sup>1</sup>. Butler claims that feminine and masculine are not what we are, nor traits we have, but effects we produce by way of certain things we do. Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame which congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance of a natural kind of being.

The 'feminist linguists' suggest that speech, too, is a repeated stylization of the body (Cameron 1999: 444). This shifts the focus away from a simple cataloguing of differences between men and women, to a subtler and more complex inquiry, into how people use linguistic resource to produce gender differentiation. Cameron points out that analyses of men's and women's speech are commonly organised around a series of global oppositions, eg. men's task is 'competitive', whereas women's is

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Shohini Ghosh, for first introducing me to the idea of gender being performative, in a paper presented in a seminar on South Asian masculinities, organised by the Sociology department of the Delhi School of Economics on February 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2002.

'cooperative', men talk to gain status, whereas women talk to forge intimacy and connection; men do 'report talk' and women 'rapport talk'. (Cameron, *ibid.*:449). People do perform gender differently in different contexts, and do sometimes behave in ways we would normally associate with the other gender. As a cultural construct, made up of learned values and beliefs, gender identity has no ontological status, suggests Senelick Lawrence (1992:X), indicating the performative nature of the construct. Similarly, Cameron argues for a more fluid notion of gender (1998:15). This conceptualisation of gender extends the traditional feminist account, whereby gender is socially constructed rather than natural'. According to the 'performative theory', becoming a woman (or a man) is not something one accomplishes once and for all at an early stage of life. Gender has to be constantly reaffirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing certain acts in accordance with cultural norms which define masculinity and femininity. (Lawrence 1992: x). A further advantage of this approach is that it acknowledges the instantability and variability of gender identities. Thus, men and women are not reduced to automata, but treated as conscious agents who may engage in acts of transgression, subversion and resistance (Cameron : 444). However such theories have been propounded mostly by linguists and discourse analysts from speech act theory, and

masculinity continues to be a somewhat marginalised field within historical study.<sup>2</sup> This is especially so for works on ancient Indian history.

*Men's studies in India: historical works*

Masculinity has been a typically neglected topic within Indological gender studies, a neglect that has reproduced the problem, where the dominant and normative identities and positionalities remain unquestioned, and hence naturalised. Most of the standard works dealing with sexuality in ancient India (Meyer 1930; De 1957; Bhattacharya 1975; Chakravarti 1963; Ghosh 1975) lack a gender perspective and have an almost fetishised focus on female sexuality.

Meyer's perspective was clearly restricted to femininity. In the preface to the German edition (v) of the book, Meyer tells us, that it is an attempt to give a true and vivid account of the life of woman in ancient India, based on the material embedded in the epics.<sup>3</sup> His method was to use liberally the very words of the epics, without any analysis. He, however included a chapter on the sexual continence of man.

Works on ancient Indian art are again replete with descriptions of female sexuality (Desai 1997: 45). Even Coomaraswamy (1965), who has

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<sup>2</sup> All works relating to masculinity in the JNU library are placed in the psychology section, which is rather curious.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, sexuality and femininity were seen as co-terminous.

dealt with the conceptual basis of nudity in Indian art, dwells at greater length on descriptions of female nudity.<sup>4</sup> Sexuality of male figures is consistently underemphasised or not mentioned at all. The issue of homosexuality and third sex constructs too has received some attention (Zwilling 2000). Yet, there is a need to tie up these issues with a much broader theme of masculinity and the gendered behaviour of the male in ancient India. Leonard Zwilling (1992) has tried to examine homosexuality in relation to Buddhist sexual morality as a whole, and dwells on the status of sexual non-conformists as religious or lay followers of Buddhism. There is a need, however, to bring together these isolated albeit allied themes within a single narrative and emphasize their interrelatedness.

A need to displace the whole system of binary thinking is suggested by Zwilling and Sweet (2000), by stating that sex need not be dimorphically visualised everytime. Jaini (1991) has outlined what can perhaps be called the most interesting debate on gender identity found in ancient Indian sources: viz. the Jaina gender/ salvation debates.

The issue of male-bonding, homosexuality, and homoeroticism has received much detailed attention in Ruth Vanita and Salim Kidwai edited *Same Sex Love in India* (2000). The book attempts to trace the history of ideas in Indian written traditions about love between men, and love

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<sup>4</sup> There seems to be an overtly lurid focus on female sexual organs.



between women, who are not biologically related. However, this work is solely interested in literary and textual representations, and is largely untheorised and unproblematized. It lacks an engagement with the question of what role dominant ideas of control over sexuality play in social regulation. Moreover, the work doesn't address questions of class and gender, among other axes, along which power is distributed in societies.

One of the premier exponents of the psychoanalytic approach, Sudhir Kakar's (1998) focus is quite directly on the problem of feminine sexuality. The book portrays Vātsyāyana as an explorer into the nature of feminine sexuality, and has little to comment on masculinity *per se*. However, I have found the ideas of Kakar (1989:118) in another work extremely useful. Arguing for a 'virility obsession' in the late Vedic period, he suggests that it was predicated upon the belief that manhood is co-extensive with semen and sexual potency.

In an insightful article, Uma Chakravarti (1998:242-68), argues that the image of Cāṅakya in the eponymous television serial was created as the archetypal figure of masculine authority, and moulded in tune with the contemporary political rhetoric. In her subsection on 'celibacy and other sexualities', she touches upon a range of 'masculine' attributes that were being portrayed via Cāṅakya, and the way in which this masculinity was being constructed.

Even though gender is not central to Daud Ali's thesis (1996:213), his remarks on the link between the Colā kings, pleasure, lordship and masculinity are illuminating. However, I am rather uncomfortable with his treatment of the *Kāmasūtra* as an all India text. Later he uses this to substantiate his theory of a 'transformed pleasure' in early medieval India, which is rather far-fetched.

The issue of masculinity has been partially addressed by scholars working on colonial India. Sara Suleri (1992:16) has talked about the marked homoeroticism of the narratives of colonial encounter. Suleri states that an 'ethos of masculinity' developed during the British Raj of India, first in England, and then later through a process of imitation within India itself. There was an accent on the masculine code of honour as it is reflected in the political world. A man was required to be aggressive, competitive, and in control of his emotions and duties. Sinha's work (1995) places masculinity at the centre of colonialist and nationalist politics. Even Nandy (1993:17) has tried to show the links between masculinity and forms of dissent in colonial India.

In the colonial period, Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927), provided a detailed and indignant account of the sexual excesses of Indian men, and the terrible sufferings of their childwives. It became a best-seller with many translations and numerous editions. The book provided

erogenous titillation and moral indignation, and served the colonial interest. The book made the claim for swaraj seem nonsense and the wish to grant it almost a crime. Therefore, my work seeks to bridge this long-standing hiatus in gender studies on ancient Indian history.

### *The text under study*

The choice of the *Mbh.* as the primary source for our purpose, is in part deliberate, so as to circumvent, to some extent, the problem of normative gender roles and identities typified in sastric literature. Being a popular work, the *Mbh.* lends itself to be viewed in a myriad ways.<sup>5</sup> The compositeness of the work is an added advantage, enabling a more ramified reading of masculinity. It is by far the biggest single literary work known to us. (Dandekar 1990:12). Like the *Rāmāyana*, the *Mbh.* has four aspects – the oral, the literary, the pictorial and the performing. The performing tradition is as old as the epic itself, and this makes the performance of the *Mbh.* a very important cultural document. (*ibid.* 183).

These advantages notwithstanding, the *Mahābhārata* and its use as a primary source is by no means unproblematic. One cannot speak of a proper context against which the work is to be analysed, even through the basic and overall milieu of the *Mbh.* may be said to belong to the early post-

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<sup>5</sup> By popular, I mean that unlike the *Vedas*, the *Mbh.* did not demand a letter-perfect preservation, and is therefore more fluid in character

vedic age (Dandekar 1990: 121). Another problem is the near monological nature of the epic. The bards were always males and appropriated the voice of the female as well at the same time, it needs to be remembered that it may have been addressed to elite men or generated by them.

The first recitation of the text is associated with the reign of king Janamejaya, who is known as a historical figure in later vedic literature (Van Buitenen 1973: xxi). In a very late portion of the *Atharvaveda*, Janamejaya's father Pārikṣit is known and glorified as one living (*ibid.*xxi). In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (c600 B.C.), his descendants, the Parikṣitas, are known as a vanished dynasty.

There is general agreement that the oldest portions preserved are hardly older than 400 B.C. The oldest testimony of the existence of a *Bhārata* text is barely before this period in Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* and two of the ritual manuals (*ibid.*xxv). Parts of it are manifestly components of the main story; others are obviously accretions that have no organic relationship to the story whatever. Parts of the *Mbh.* are regarded as later additions, and some of these could well be contemporary with the early Purāṇas, or at least were borrowing from a common source of ideas, current by the second or third centuries A.D. (Thapar1996:14).

The oldest dated manuscript that was used for the 'critical edition' of the *Mbh* was a Nepali manuscript that bore a date corresponding to AD

1511 (Sukthankar 1933: VI). The text of the epic has been handed down in two divergent traditions, a Northern and Southern recension. Both recensions are in final analysis independent copies of an orally transmitted text.

Archaeological studies suggest that the origins of the *Mbh.* can be traced back to c.500 B.C., while a significant retouching of the epic took place between c.600 and 200 B.C. Particularly remarkable was the thorough overhauling of war weapons (Lad 1985: 72). Astronomical studies have proposed 1424 B.C. as the date of the *Bhārata* battle (Roy 1976: 129).

There are several landgrants, dated between AD 450 and AD 500 and found in various parts of India, which quote the *Mbh.* as an authority teaching the rewards of pious donors and the punishments of impious despoilers. This shows that in the middle of the fifth century it already possessed the same character as present, that of a smṛti or Dharmasāstra. Bāṇa mentions that the *Mbh.* was recited in the temple of Mahākāla at Ujjain (Macdonell 1962: 241).

The old *Bhārata* must have been first composed after the early vedic period, for the area where the conflict is localised lies well east of the Punjab, which is the home of the *R̥g. Veda*. On the other hand, the knowledge of the countries further east of the Ganga-Yamuna doab is only

sketchy. A struggle for control over the upper Ganga and the Yamuna was obviously credible to the audience and is likely to have been part of the eastward movement of the Aryans. The eastern countries of Kosala, which in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the centre of the world; and Magadha, where the Buddha preached, and where the first Indian empire was to rise in the third century B.C., do not play an important role in the epic (Buitenen 1973: xxii). On the basis of this data it seems more likely than not that the origins of the *Mbh.* fall somewhere in the ninth or eighth century B.C. The didactic portions, that is, the *Śānti* and the *Anuśāsana* parvans were added as late as the fourth century A.D. Thus, the sixth century A.D. can be taken as a reasonable cut-off date, for considering the methods used in the ‘critical edition’, it is unlikely that additions from after this date survive in it.

In its present form, the *Mbh.* has about 100,000 stanzas. Originally, it consisted of 24,000 stanzas only. Its growth to the present size seems to have been completed by about the fourth century A.D., but the process is conjectured to have stretched back to about seven or eight centuries (Chaitanya 1977:200) The internal evidence from the *Mbh.* suggests that it was put together at various times (Thapar 2000: 615).

The present ‘critical text’ has eighteen divisions, each called a parvan. The ‘Critical Edition’ was prepared after forty years of labour by collating forty manuscripts. It contains 78,675 verses, of which 20,000

verses cover the conflict between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas (Sharma 1987:136). The very word *Mahābhārata* enables us recognize stages in the making of this work. Perhaps, there was a simpler and less extensive story called *Bhārata* and then, by century – long accretions, it became a *Mahābhārata*. The epic gives the impression that there was an earlier time when the narration was simpler and shorter, called *Jaya*. This indicates that in the earliest form the narration was a poem of victory and eulogised the victory of a particular king over his rival (Hopkins 1969: 386-403).

Perhaps it was sung by the bards at the court of the king, and as the narration betrays, was also sung by wandering minstrels. In the story as it is presented, the chief narrators are different bards called *sutas*. Thus, in one case it starts with Vaiśampāyana (2.1.1), and in another with the recitation by Ugrasravas (1.1.6). Vaiśampāyana is the chief narrator up to a point and then tells it as told by the third narrator Sanjaya, and after the battle portion Vaiśampāyana resumes telling. It is reasonable to assume that the epic derives its characteristic style and prolix detail from oral recitation at ceremonial and social assemblies. Thus, the epic was handed down from bard to bard originally by word of mouth, as is clearly implied by tradition.

All this shows, that what would come down from generation to generation were, first, the summaries; and, second, the technique of

spinning out a tale to please the listeners. Thus, the reciter was also a creative poet. In contrast to the *Vedas*, which necessitated an exact preservation, the epic was a popular work whose reciters were more amenable to changes in language and style. The epic poet is constantly reflecting on the past times from the perspective of the present. Therefore, it has been assumed that even in early phases, the *Mbh.* textual tradition must have been not uniform and simple but multiple and polygenous.

The dispute regarding the date and redaction of the *Mbh* notwithstanding, my attempt here will be to study the various representations of masculinity that the entire text in its present form conveys. I will therefore, be treating the entire *Mbh.* as a singular and unitary text, adhering to the chronological limits suggested by the 'Critical Edition'.

### ***Issues, objectives and methodology***

This work intends to overcome the historiographical lacunae in works relating to gender on ancient India, by turning the focus on representations of male gendered behaviour. The institutionalised project of women's studies has rarely sought to problematize and historicise masculinity.

It is not my endeavour to arrive at a definition or an overarching theory of masculinity in ancient India. The agenda of the study is rather



limited – to gain an understanding of the discursive practices of masculinity as depicted in the *Mbh.*<sup>6</sup> These discursive practices are however, pertinent to the debates on gender in ancient India. Again, I am not working with a preconceived idea of masculinity.

However, for the sake of sustaining my narrative I need to state what I mean by aspects of masculinity. For the purpose, I completely rely on what the *Mbh.* itself identifies (which it frequently does) as elements of masculinity (*Pauruseya*) or male behaviour, and therefore, my terms of masculinity lie within the text. These may range from aggression and prowess, to continence and asceticism. I would like to clarify that I have used the methods of feminist historians. I have also found Foucault's approach useful for an understanding of my text. Foucault points out that when a text has multiple authors, or several authors of a text are referred to by one name, it implies that a relationship of common utilisation was established among them. He further states that in this way the function of an author, however fictitious, is to characterise the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society (Foucault 1977: 123-24).

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<sup>6</sup> The word 'discourse' is being used in the post modern Foucauldian sense, as a passage of spoken or written language that reflects the social, epistemological and rhetorical practices of a group: or the power of language to reflect, influence, and constrain these practices in a group. (Foucault 1980:80)

I need to overstate that this work is not about an objective reality of masculinity but only about discourses related to it. Bearing in mind, the nature of my text (*Mbh.*), I have for the most part deliberately tried to avoid a contextual approach, and have focused on representations alone. I have avoided the psychoanalytic approach, and my explanations mostly derive from cultural arguments.<sup>7</sup> In part, this is because of my own incompetence regarding the subject. Secondly, psychoanalysis has come under heavy attack especially in the writings of Foucault. Instead of treating it as a critical event in the history of human sciences, he sees psychoanalysis as only one element in the entire apparatus of knowledge-power (Forrester 1990:297). Foucault disputes the reality of that wave of sexual repression that supposedly overtook Western society in the nineteenth century, from which psychoanalysis has often claimed as helping to rescue us. (*ibid.*298). He displaces the scientific arguments of psychoanalysis, transforming them into the conditions under which a historical system of discourses, of knowledge power came into existence (*ibid.*302).

The main body of this work consists of three chapters. **Chapter one** is an analysis of the discourse on masculinity with a focus on the brahmanic and ksatriyaic models. It is within this discourse that I locate the markers of, and the terms of reference of masculinity. The first section directly focuses on the discourse on masculinity, while in the next two

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<sup>7</sup> By cultural arguments, I mean the treatment of gender as a social construct.

sections I will examine two major markers of masculinity; namely, anger and weapons. The focus on anger allows me to let in the dimension of emotion into this conceptual framework, a dimension often neglected in social science paradigms. The last section of this chapter is about the link between maleness and weapons.

In **chapter two**, I problematise the practice of asceticism in the *Mbh.*, and try to analyse its association with and implications for masculinity. The first section examines the link between celibacy, asceticism and masculinity. The second section of the chapter deals with the boon and curse giving power of the ascetics, as it represents the major ways in which power is sought to be exercised in the epic. The following section makes a case study of Arjuna as an archetypal *kṣatriya* ascetic, and the manifold masculine tensions acting on him.

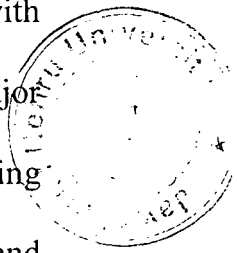
The **third chapter** focuses on unmanliness and tries to examine as to what constitutes the deviant and the transgressive for masculinity. My first section is about the various references to the *klība* throughout the epic. The emphasis will be on how crucial is the *klība* to the construction of a masculine identity, and the contexts in which the term is invoked. The question of liminal sexuality is addressed in the second section which examines two famous cases of bisexual transformations viz. Arjuna/Bṛhannadā and Ambā/ Śikhaṇḍin. The last section is about

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homoerotic relationships, where I will attempt to explain that to what extent the text considers homoerotic behavior to be transgressive. Thus, by tying up the above three themes, I will try to arrive at what constitutes the normative and transgressive for male behaviour and masculine identities<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> All references to the *Mbh*, unless otherwise stated are from the Critical Edition.

## Chapter One

### THE DISCOURSE ON MASCULINITY: KSATRIYAIC AND BRAHMANIC MODELS

Men in ancient India were not a homogenous category. Unlike women, men in ancient India were generally classified according to *varṇa*. Hence, my attempt in this chapter is to analyze masculinity within the framework of *varṇa*. The chapter deals with brahmanic and ksatriyaic notions of masculinity, and attempts a discursive study of the twin notions. Significantly, this figures as a running theme in the *Mbh*. The *Mbh* is replete with examples of tussles between brāhmaṇas and kṣatriyas, and many of these serve to illuminate different ideals of masculinity. Viewing masculinity along the *varṇa* axis, helps us problematize the discourse and explore the parameters of manhood.

The first section deals with what it means to be a *puruṣa* for a ksatriya and a brahmin, and the degree to which these distinct notions are conflated. This debate becomes more interesting if we observe the different discourses on anger that are talked about in the epic, which is the subject of my next section. The last section of the chapter is about the link between weapons and masculinity, where I will attempt to examine whether weapons can be seen as an extension of male persona. I begin, by addressing some problems on the texts' authorship.]

### *Analysing the discourse*

Grierson (1955; 29) held that the *Mbh.* belonged to the kṣatriya tradition, and it had its origin in an oral tradition of heroic ballads. But gradually, mythological and cosmological narratives of brahmanical origin were added. Even JD Smith regards the *Mbh.* as the ‘property’ of the kṣatriyas (1980: 49). According to him, the epic extolled their heroes, and expounded their value system. However, he further states that even though the *Mbh.* belonged to the kṣatriyas, it wasn’t composed by them. The creators and transmitters of the epic were the sutas, a specific caste that was symbiotically related to the kṣatriyas. Sukthankar (1936: 65-75) on the other hand argued that the inclusion of didactic material on dharma and nīti shows the Bhārgava influence over the epic (1936: 65-75). This view has been supported by Goldman (1977: 3) who has demonstrated that the Bhārgava sect of the brāhmaṇas was responsible for brahmanising the epic. The main narrative of the epic definitely suggests that the kṣatriyas were the chief protagonists of the text. However, being a composite work it shows the influence of numerous traditions and practices. The composite nature of the work, therefore, has to be kept in mind when we observe the discourses surrounding masculinity.

In the kṣatriyaic ideal masculinity is construed to mean aggression. Consequently, kṣatriya men are portrayed as physically stronger, brave, adept weapon-wielders and tough. The most direct and clear references to

ksatriyaic masculinity come from the Udyoga Parvan.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the lady Vidurā, told her son, the rājā of Sindhu, goading him to fight, that one becomes a man by deeds that best others in ‘austerity’<sup>2</sup> and gallantry<sup>3</sup> (5.131.19). She further states:

Win mettle and honour, known your manliness<sup>4</sup> (5.131.30). A man is stated to be a man to the extent of his ‘truculence’<sup>5</sup> and unforgiveness<sup>6</sup> (5.131.30).

Duryodhana’s challenge to Yudhiṣṭhira through Ulūka’s embassy bears out a similar aspect of masculinity. He says:

Carry out what you have promised, remember your rage, the rape of your kingdom, the molestation of Draupadī. Be a man! (5.158.9).<sup>7</sup>

Here, we notice that even rage gets associated with manhood. His words to Pārtha are:

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<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, as the war is imminent

<sup>2</sup> *Tapas*

<sup>3</sup> *Vikrama, Parākrama*

<sup>4</sup> *Pauruṣam*

<sup>5</sup> *yadmarṣi*

<sup>6</sup> *Yadkṣami*, In the epic, the story is narrated to Kṛṣṇa by Kuntī, and was meant to be conveyed to the Pāṇḍavas

<sup>7</sup> *Amarsa rājyuharaṇam vanavāsam ca pāṇḍava, Draupadhasca pariklesam sansmaranpuruṣo bhava.*

Avenge your grudge displaying your manly strength in war<sup>8</sup>. Rancour is manhood, be a man Pārtha. Show off in war your anger, strength and deftness in arms.

Thus, arms and weapons again, are means of displaying manhood. In another instance the *Mbh.* says that a man is somebody who forgoes comfort, and etymologizing the word *puruṣa* says that a man is called so because he is a match for a city (5.131.33). Manhood is described as ‘standing tall’<sup>9</sup>, and the purpose of the *kṣatriya* to fight and win (5.133.10).<sup>10</sup>

Another aspect of ksatriyaic masculinity is force or *bala* and it is stated that a *kṣatriya* does not obtain what he cannot grab by force (5.73.20). In fact, the various cases of women being abducted are regarded as masculine feats in the *Mbh.* Bhīṣma himself regarded the abduction of the Kāśī princesses as a masculine feat (2.170.13). Arjuna, when glorifying Kṛṣṇa, and mentioning the latter’s conquest, praised him for abducting his queen from the Bhojas after defeating Rukmin (3.13.25). Kṛṣṇa, himself at one time states that he always prided himself on his manliness (3.19.20).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Amarṣa darsāyadhya tvammarṣo hyova pauruṣam.

<sup>9</sup> Uddhya chhedeva na name duddhyamo hyova pauruṣam.

<sup>10</sup> Yuddhāya kṣatriya sṛṣṭa saṁjayeha jayāya ca.

<sup>11</sup> Santam nityam puruṣamaninam



Similarly, Sahadeva while enumerating the riches that Arjuna won, also mentioned his girls (3.71.25).<sup>12</sup>

‘Vigour’<sup>13</sup> along with force is portrayed as a masculine quality and the phrase ‘manly vigour’<sup>14</sup> is repeatedly used. (1.12.13; 2.15.10; 3.13.105; 5.61.4) Such is the importance of masculine vigour that Yudhiṣṭhira questions Mārkaṇḍeya as to what would happen to ‘masculine vigour’ in the *kali* age. Mārkaṇḍeya replied that virility<sup>15</sup> will shrink by one fourth (3.188.5). In the Sauptika parvan, Kṛpa introspects on manliness<sup>16</sup> and regards it as one of the two most superior forces (10.2.2-20).<sup>17</sup> He goes on to say that idle and dull men in the world ‘disapprove of manliness’ (10.2.12). Exertion, says Kṛpa again, becomes fruitless without manliness (10.2.19). In the Bhīṣma Parvan it is stated that men born in the kali age will possess little energy<sup>18</sup> (6.10.14). The other masculine traits that are talked about are indefatigability (5.47.80); raising oneself and not cowering (5.125.19), masculine prowess<sup>19</sup> and extreme rage<sup>20</sup> (1.46.1), (1.124.30),

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion on force or *bala* as a masculine quality, see chapter 2, especially the section on boons and curses.

<sup>13</sup> *Bala*

<sup>14</sup> Mahābāhu pauruṣe. Also see 3.285.5; 7.1.44; 3.285.5

<sup>15</sup> *Virya*.

<sup>16</sup> *Pauruṣam*.

<sup>17</sup> The other being destiny.

<sup>18</sup> Tejas.

<sup>19</sup> *Mahābāhu pauruṣe*

<sup>20</sup> *Tīvra kopa*

vengeance (1.12.8); manly efforts<sup>21</sup> (1.192.12); pride (3.11.20); and manly courage (1.200.5),

However, ksatriyaic masculinity was not merely about aggression; it had a protective side too; even though protection had to be achieved through aggression. Draupadī, when kicked by Kīcaka, cried out to the Pāṇḍavas that how could they silently suffer, and where had their ‘virility’<sup>22</sup> and ‘intransigence’<sup>23</sup> gone (4.15.20-24). Elsewhere, it is stated that just as all birds snap up a piece of meat fallen on the ground, so all men snap up a woman without a man (1.146.12). Again, it is said by Draupadī that husbands however feeble must protect their wives (3.13.60). A lot of masculine qualities are said to be displayed for, or because of women. For instance, the Gandharva tells Arjuna, that no man who relies on his strength would condone it when he sees himself insulted before a woman’s eyes (1.159.10). Endurance<sup>24</sup> is also regarded as a quality of ksatriyaic manhood. Thus, Paraśurāma on seeing that Karṇa patiently bore the pain in his thigh pierced by a worm, cursed him. Beholding Karṇa’s patience, Paraśurāma said:

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<sup>21</sup> Pauruṣam.

<sup>22</sup> Vīrya.

<sup>23</sup> Ka nu teṣammarṣaṣca.

<sup>24</sup> Sahatvam.

You are never a brāhmaṇa, tell me truly who you are. (5.61.4; 5.42.3-8).<sup>25</sup>

These qualities of kṣatriyaic masculinity are further highlighted by counterposing them against brāhmanic qualities. Often they are poised vis-à-vis the *klība*, variously translated as eunuch, castrate and a deformed male.<sup>26</sup> Jarāsaṃdha tells the Pāṇḍavas:

Your arms are scarred by the bow-string, while a brahmin's prowess lies mostly in his tongue<sup>27</sup> (2.19.42).

Even Viśvāmitras' words to Vasiṣṭha in this regard are interesting. He says:

I am a *kṣatriya*, you are a brahmin with no more means than asceticism and Vedic study.<sup>28</sup> How can there be virility<sup>29</sup> in Brahmins who are serene<sup>30</sup> and have mastered themselves? (1.165.17).

However, the same Viśvāmitra later realizes his limitations, and effecting a *volte face*, says that on weighing weakness and strength,

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<sup>25</sup> Karna stayed with Paraśurāma in the guise of a brāhmaṇa with a view to obtain the celestial weapons from him

<sup>26</sup> The Klība as a non-maculine entity is separately discussed in the final chapter. For various meanings of the Klība, see Zwilling and Sweet (2000).

<sup>27</sup> *Vaddhavaṃ vāci vīrya ca brāhmaṇasya viśeṣṭaha.*

<sup>28</sup> *Svādhyāyasādhanā.*

<sup>29</sup> *Brāhmaṇesu kuto vīrya.*

<sup>30</sup> *Prasāntesu.*

asceticism, to him, appeared to be the superior power (1.165.40). Similarly, taunting him, Bhīma spoke to Yudhiṣṭhira:

You are meek<sup>31</sup> like a brahmin. Tough-minded<sup>32</sup> men are usually born in *kṣatriya* wombs. (3.36.20).

Also notable are Utanka's words to Pauṣya, where he says that even though a brahmin's heart is mild as butter, in his words lies a honed blade (1.3.130). Another passage states that in brahmins there is unequalled insight,<sup>33</sup> and in ksatriyahood matchless strength (3.27.15).<sup>34</sup>

Many brāhmaṇas desisted Arjuna from the attempt to string the bow during Draupadī's Svayamvara.<sup>35</sup> They reasoned that how could a stripling of a brāhmaṇa, weak in strength, string that bow, which such celebrated kṣatriyas like Śalya and others, endowed with great might could not accomplish (1.179.1). At the same time, there were other brahmins who didn't share this view of brahmins being weak. They spoke of the defeat of the kṣatriyas at the hands of Paraśurāma.<sup>36</sup> They also cited Agastya, who drank up the unfathomable ocean by his brahmanic might (1.80.1). Even Droṇa told Drupada, after defeating the latter through his students, that

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<sup>31</sup> *Ghṛṇi brāhmaṇarūpo*

<sup>32</sup> *Krūrabuddhaya.*

<sup>33</sup> *Brāhmanyānupama dṛṣṭi.*

<sup>34</sup> *Kṣatramapratimam balaṃ.*

<sup>35</sup> Arjuna was dressed as a brahmin.

<sup>36</sup> In the epic, Paraśurāma may easily be considered the superlative symbol of brahmanic power and aggression. He is said to have killed the kṣatriyas 21 times over. Consequently, the kṣatriya women went to Brahmins for offspring.

Drupada need not worry about his life, as the brahmins were not vindictive (1.128.8). Vasīṣṭha, in the Ādi Parvan, comments that a kṣatriya's strength was his energy, while a brahmin's was his forbearance (1.165.28).<sup>37</sup> Brahmanic passivity is shown in the episode where Vasīṣṭha attempted suicide, having learnt that Viśvāmitra had killed his hundred sons (1.167.1). Yudhiṣṭhira defines brahmins as someone in whom patience, self-control and compassion are found (3.177.15). As declared by Vidura:

As milk is expected from cows, asceticism from Brahmins (5.36.57).<sup>38</sup>

In a similar vein, Sanatsujāta comments that brāhmaṇas who do not compete in strength shine hereafter in the world of heaven (5.42.19). Simply put, the dominant discourse is; kṣatriyas are aggressive and the brahmins passive and the deviation was regarded anomalous. Given the fact that aggression is represented as an important element of ksatriyaic masculinity, and passivity a brahmanic quality, one may state that in the ksatriyaic discourse the brahmins were non-masculine.

More is revealed about the discourse on masculinity if we shift to the emotional plane, and consider the discourses surrounding 'anger'.<sup>39</sup> Anger or rage, we have already noted, is an important element of kṣatriyaic

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<sup>37</sup> *Kṣatriyanāma balam tejo brāhmaṇanām ksama balam.*

<sup>38</sup> This, however, is a didactic statement, and needs to be observed against the actual portrayal of brahmins in the epic, which is far from ascetic.

<sup>39</sup> Kopa and Krodha.

masculinity, and often a crucial and necessary concomitant of aggression. This is the subject of the following section.

***Anger: a masculine emotion***

This section focuses on how a particular emotion, which the *Mbh.* itself consider masculine is, crucial to the display and performance of a host of other masculine acts.<sup>40</sup> The epic allows women to show anger, especially *kṣatriya* women. To that extent, *kṣatriya* women may be considered masculine.<sup>41</sup> However, what they are not allowed, is aggression.<sup>42</sup> Regarding masculinity; like ‘aggression’, the epic tries to portray ‘anger’ as *kṣatriya*-specific, but examples of contestation abound.

Once more, the dominant discourse is that *kṣatriyas* are supposed to show anger, and brahmins remain passive. In a famously provocative dialogue, Draupadī tells Yudhiṣṭhira:

Your anger doesn’t grow, and that perplexes me ----- there is no *kṣatriya* known in the world without anger, without challenge<sup>43</sup> (3.28.25-34).

She further tells him:

In yourself, you see manliness, but are prone to gentility<sup>44</sup> 3.34.15).

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<sup>40</sup> The words *kopa* and *krodha* figure on almost every page of the critical edition, from the Udyog Parvan upto the war ends.

<sup>41</sup> Draupadī in particular.

<sup>42</sup> For a typical example, see the Ambā/Sikhaṇḍin case discussed in chapter 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Spardha*

<sup>44</sup> This brings me to Buitenen’s (1973: 15) argument of Yudhiṣṭhira being brahmanic and Bhīma *kṣatriyaic*, something on which I will comment later.

Similarly, Vidura described her son, the Rājā of Sindhu, as too cowardly<sup>45</sup> for anger (5.131.5). She further states:

No woman ever bear a son like you, without anger and manhood.<sup>46</sup>  
(5.131.28)

Thus, for kṣatriyas, anger and manhood occur in conjunction, and anger was necessary for the demonstration of other masculine traits. It preceded; enhanced, and precipitated aggression. Kṛṣṇa tells Yudhiṣṭhira that the latter would be able to kill the king of the Madras, if worked up with anger in the in the battle (9.7.32). The text suggests that aggression and strength increase with anger. Thus, Kṛṣṇa is said to have stated about himself:

All the kings combined do not suffice to stand up to me in battle, if I am angry. (5.70.85).

It is stated for Bhīma, that when angered, he had terrible strength (1.55.19).<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Duryodhana also states that nobody could with stands him in battle if he was angry (1.181.15). Warning Duryodhana, that he shouldn't offend the Pāṇḍavas, Maitreya told him, that the Pāṇḍavas were full of anger and manhood (3.11.20). For Bhīma and Arjuna, it is said that (5.88.80) when enraged beyond measure, they were like death. Anger

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<sup>45</sup> Karpanyam.

<sup>46</sup> Ahīnpauruṣā.

<sup>47</sup> Bhīmasenovadhītakruddho bhūvi bhīma parākṇama

could be ended only by aggression. Thus, Sātyaki in the Udyoga Parvan is made to declare:

Only when Duryodhana is killed will my anger be appeased.  
(5.79.5).

That anger knew only aggression is reflected in Sahadeva's statement:

How could my rage at Suyodhana subside without bloodshed  
(5.79.1)

Anger, thus, is an important marker of ksatriyaic masculinity. In the ksatriyaic discourse on masculinity, the brahmins were represented as bereft of anger and aggression. Yet, there are numerous variations on this emphasis on anger. And, as in aggression, so in anger, the brahmanic and ksatriyaic notions of masculinity are conflated. Thus, Janamejaya's wrath is described as restrained (1.50.10).<sup>48</sup> The Brahmin, Aurva cannot consent to be one whose vow and anger is fruitless (1.171.1).<sup>49</sup> Durvāsa, by temperament, is a very wrathful ṛṣi (3.261.9-11). At the same time, Bhīma's control of anger in the Śisūpāla episode is considered a manly virtue (2.39.18). Thus, Buitenen's notion of a ksatriyaic Bhīma and

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<sup>48</sup> Niyatṣaca Kopa.

<sup>49</sup> In fact, there is a close relation between ascetic/brahmanic curses and anger. Curses are in a sense, represented as manifestations of brahmanic anger. See chapter 2; the section on boons and curses. Also, note the relation between boons and weapons. Examples of other angry ascetics: Khagam (1.11.1), Vibhāvasu is quick to anger (Kopāno bhṛṣam); Śṛiṅgin (1.37.1); Jaratkāru 91.43.25).



brahmanic Yudhiṣṭhira cannot be taken as wholly true, at least, not in the plane of masculinity. Aurva says that the man who suppresses his anger excited by a just cause is incapable of duly compassing *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*.

Emphasizing brahmanic anger, Mārkaṇḍeya said:

The brāhmaṇas have anger as their weapon; they never fight with weapons of iron or steel. (3.199.78).

It is said of Aśvatthāma, that he built up his wrath and splendour by practicing austerities (5.64.8).<sup>50</sup> Similarly, an angered brahmin is described as a fire and poison (1.24.4). Further it is said that an angered brahmin destroyed capitals and kingdoms (1.76.25). Above all, a number of ‘manly kṣatriyas’ are said to have been born from brahmins (1.98.30).

The counter-discourse on controlling anger is itself portrayed as a sign of manliness.<sup>51</sup> When Bhīma kept his anger under check despite instigation, he was described as being ‘steadfast in his manliness’ (2.39.18)<sup>52</sup> Arjuna while praising Kṛṣṇa and describing his glories and conquests said:

There is no anger in you<sup>53</sup> (3.13.30)

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<sup>50</sup> *Taporata*.

<sup>51</sup> This applies for brahmins and kṣatriyas

<sup>52</sup> *Pauruṣe sve vyavasthita*.

<sup>53</sup> Ironically, the purpose of Arjuna’s speech was to curb Kṛṣṇa’s anger. Thus, masculinity is both about showing and curbing anger.

Vidura states that if one endures, then wrath will burn the abuser (5.36.5), and that people always liked to befriend those who never boast of their manliness (5.33.90) Śukra is said to have declared that he who holds his rising anger has won all (1.74.1). Śāmika told Śṛṅgin, when the latter was consumed by rage:

Give up your anger, for the anger of ascetics kills the merit they have painfully gathered. Serenity alone works for ascetics.<sup>54</sup>

It is mentioned in the Anuśāsana Parvan, that even great energy and penances become neutralized if applied against a *brāhmaṇa* who has conquered anger. (13.8.27). But nobody actually conquered anger. Even after reaching heaven, in the Svargarohanika Parvan, Yudhiṣṭhira was overpowered with anger, seeing Duryodhana's prosperity (18.1.16).

The *Mbh.* recognizes that anger is only for the strong. Thus, Vidura states:

He is a stupid man who gets angry without having power<sup>55</sup> (5.33.36). There are two sharp thorns that sap the body – A poor man to covet, and a powerless man to rage. (5.33.50).<sup>56</sup>

Clearly, anger preceded aggression, and aggression presupposes power. Mastery over anger-the ability to deploy it and rein it in, use it effectively, rather than being overcome by anger is considered masculine. Women on the other hand, are probably shown as succumbing to the

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<sup>54</sup> The *Mbh.*, hardly throws up examples of serene ascetics.

<sup>55</sup> Yasca krudhatyanīśā sansa ca mūḍhatamo nara.

<sup>56</sup> Kupyatyanīṣvara.

emotion of rage. Aggression in the *Mbh.* is majorly manifested by the use of weapons, and the last section of this chapter will examine the role of weapons in the construction of masculinity.

***Weapons: an extension of male persona***

One cannot imagine male aggression in the *Mbh.* without weapons. Almost half of the ksatriyas and all the asuras perform asceticism for procuring weapons. The world of weapons is a unisexual one and begs the question: What is more powerful, the weapon or the man? In other words, the question that I am posing is: how masculine are men in the *Mbh.* sans weapons. *Kṣatriya* men craved for weapons, and weapons were considered as hard to obtain.<sup>57</sup> Underlining the importance of weapons, Arjuna told Yudhiṣṭhira:

I have got, bow, arms, arrows and strength. Whatever men desire and find hard to obtain. (2.23.1).

The first question that Yudhiṣṭhira asked Arjuna, when the latter returned from Indraloka, was whether Arjuna had learnt the use of weapons correctly (3.163.4).<sup>58</sup> When asked by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, to choose boons, Draupadī chose the Pāṇḍavas with their weapons and chariots (2.63.33).

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<sup>57</sup> However, weapons were procured by performing asceticism, which is represented as a brahmanic ideal. See chapter 2 for the nature of asceticism. Interestingly, the *kṣatriyas* learn the art of using weapons from brahmīns, who in the *kṣatriyaic* discourse are represented as non-aggressive.

<sup>58</sup> Arjuna's is a weapon – centric masculinity. Rarely is he described without the *gāṇḍīva*. Bhīma, though a skilled clubman, also improvises weapons --- trees and boulders for instance.

When Jaṭāsura was carrying away Draupadī and the weapons of the Pāṇḍavas; Yudhiṣṭhira told him:

Give us back our weapons, and carry away Draupadī after a fair fight (3.157.25-27).

Clearly, Draupadī is negotiable, but not the weapons. Śiva took pride in giving the Pāśupata weapon to Arjuna saying that neither Indra, nor Yama, nor Varuṇa knows about it (3.40.16).

Adeptness in wielding weapons is recognized by the *Mbh.* as an important marker of masculinity. (5.157.5-10). Paraśurāma cursed Karṇa that the latter will forget the Brahmā weapon when he needs it most (12.3.29). It is for this reason that Bhīṣma considers him only half a warrior (5.165.1). Nakula and Sahadeva, who are not famed as expert weapon users are described as weak. Thus, Kuntī calls Nakula a ‘delicate warrior’ (5.88.40).<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Bhīma describes the twins of Mādri as very delicate (3.141.20). Pining for her children in the Udyog Parvan, Kuntī told Kṛṣṇa:

Will I ever see Nakula, that delicate warrior (5.88.40).

The prowess of Arjuna, is to a large extent weapon-centric. He is an ambidextrous archer and his quiver had inexhaustible arrows (5.59.12).<sup>60</sup> About Bhīma, it is said that with weapons, he is the equal of Droṇa and

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<sup>59</sup> *Sukumaram mahāratham.*

<sup>60</sup> Given to Arjuna by Agni (1.55.37).

Arjuna (5.50.10). Bhīṣma says in connection with Arjuna that he doesn't see a greater warrior on earth, for he knew the divine weapons (5.153.19). He is himself shown as flaunting his divine-weaponed status, and takes pride in having the missile that Paśupati gave him, and about which even Gangeya and Droṇa did'nt know (5.175.2). Even when going for renunciation in the Mahāprasthānika Parvan, he did not throw off his celestial bow Gāṇḍīva, nor his couple of inexhaustible quivers. (17.1.34).

Such is the identification of Arjuna and Gāṇḍīva, that the latter is often used as a synecdoche for Arjuna. It is, as if, Gāṇḍīva were Arjuna. It is mentioned that Gāṇḍīva was defeated in a disastrous pass (1.2.228). In the Mausala Parvan, when his bow refused to obey him, and his arrows were exhausted, Arjuna became greatly ashamed (16.7.56-65)<sup>61</sup>. Sanjay says that in the impending war, Gāṇḍīva will destroy the whole ksatriyahood (5.53.1).<sup>62</sup> Arjuna, in the cattle raiding episode of the Virāṭa Parvan, tells Uttara to quickly fetch his bow, as none other could withstand his strength (4.38.1). In fact, Draupadi's svayamvara itself is a test of strength of various princes by means of weapons (1.178.1). In the same episode, Karṇa comments on Arjuna:

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<sup>61</sup> *Lajjita*

<sup>62</sup> Weapons; Gāṇḍīva in particular seem to have a persona of their own.

Today, you shall see Pārtha with his chariot gone and manliness spent<sup>63</sup> (4.43.20).

Arjuna, unlike Bhīma, is quite powerless without his weapons. In his fight with the mountain man, seeing that his arrows were exhausted, Arjuna began to tremble (3.40.35). Similarly, describing his fight with the gandharvas, he told Yudhiṣṭhira:

After the Brahmā weapon had been defeated, panic seized me (3.163.35).

Karna states that relying on the weapons that he obtained from Jāmadagnya, he could even fight Vāsava (4.43.15). Weapons often defined the threshold of man's prowess, and therefore masculinity. Conversely, masculinity in the *Mbh.* is in a lot of ways dependent on weapons or weapon-centric. Paraśurāma, fighting against Bhīṣma for Ambā's sake, and unable to defeat Bhīṣma, told her:

I am not able to surpass in battle; although I fully dispersed all my super weapons. This is the limit of my power, this is the limit of my strength. (5.187.3).

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<sup>63</sup> *Hatāsvam virtham parthe pauruṣe paryavasthitam.* Once more, the link between masculinity and weapons is driven in

## *Summary*

In this chapter I have discussed, what representations in the *Mbh.* make man masculine by focusing on the qualities, adjectives, attributes and terms used to denote masculinity in the ksatriyaic and brahmanic discourse. Aggression anger, and weaponry skills were crucial components of ksatriyaic masculinity. As against the 'aggressive' ideal of the ksatriyas, the ideal for the brahmins that the text tries to portray is 'ascetic'. However, there are examples of contestation in this dominant discourse. Moreover, masculinity itself is not something unified: the control of anger is as much a manly act as its display; weapons are symbols of masculine power but are obtained through asceticism. While this chapter was mostly about the ksatriyaic discourse on masculinity with the brahmanic ideal figuring as the 'other'; my next chapter seeks to locate masculinity within asceticism which is considered to be the ideal for brahmins.

## Chapter Two

### LOCATING MASCULINITY IN ASCETICISM

In this chapter, I problematize the practice of asceticism in the *Mbh*; and analyse its association with and implications for maleness. I will attempt to explain the fragile asceticism that the text portrays and examine how far is asceticism portrayed as an abstention from sexual relations. The first section will examine celibacy and the discourses enveloping it. A major way by which ascetic powers are shown to be exercised in the *Mbh* are by virtue of boons and curses, which is the subject of my next section. The third section deals with the study of Arjuna as an archetypal *ksatriya* ascetic. The focus on asceticism helps bring out such aspects of masculinity that are not as salient in the ksatriyaic discourse.

Asceticism may be called the practice of denying worldly pleasures in order to achieve a spiritual good (Palmisano 2001: 38). The term comes from the Greek ‘*askesis*’ for training. Ascetic acts are generally associated with acts of sin or atonement, or with the realization of the world’s transitory nature. Celibacy, abdication of worldly goods, and fasting are some of the common ascetic practices. Foucault (1986: 42) saw asceticism as an act by which an individual asserts his self worth by means of actions that set him apart and enable him to win others. He saw the Christian ascetic movement of the first centuries, as an extremely strong accentuation



of the relations of oneself to oneself. Ascetic life is based on vows, mostly negative, and difficult to keep, and perhaps that made the ascetic a symbol, of authority within society.

The term *samnyasin* is the Sanskrit equivalent of the English term ascetic. It is derived from the root 'as', meaning to throw. It thus means throwing off, abandoning or renunciation. Ascetic practices are spoken of collectively as *tapas* (Sharma 1987: 4,13). In Later Vedic literature, terms such as *tapasvin*, *ṣramaṇa*, *saṁnyāsin*, *parivrājak* and *yogī* occur more commonly. They are redolent of renunciation, or casting aside of one's social obligation; of the taking on of a life of austerity; of controlling the functions of the body; and above all, of wandering from place to place. (Thapar 2000:881).

Thapar has suggested that the charisma of a renouncer derived from the practice and pursuit of non-orthodox knowledge. Also important was the fact of their creating an alternate or parallel society (*ibid* 907). The authority of the *saṁnyāsin* deriving from the fact of renunciation coupled with the power of *tapas* and *dhyāna* was seen as a parallel authority to that of temporal power. The later didactic interpolations in the two epics raise the power of the ascetic higher than even that of the great deity of the sacrifices, Indra. Even kings are shown as fearful of the wrath of the *saṁnyāsin* (*ibid* 938).

The ascetic is hardly a new category in the scholarship on ancient Indian social history. A vast body of literature exists on male renunciation. However, most of these works are of the nature of broad surveys, mapping the entire life-span of the ascetic. (Ghurye 1964; Campbell 1967; Chakraborti 1973; Bhagat 1976; Sharma 1987; Zysk 1991). The focus of scholars like Heesterman (1989) and Dumont (1970) has been on different kinds of male asceticism rather than on the issue of gender within ascetic traditions.

The gender dimension of the existence of the ascetic has been overlooked in most of the works. This is even more true of the male ascetic, a notable exception being Doniger's work (1973). Doniger highlighted the fact that the Brahmanical ascetic is depicted as sexually active. She also pointed out that ascetic practices often yield erotic benefits. Various arguments have been advanced for the ascetic's demonstration of sexual prowess, and I will examine these in the subsequent sections where I describe the practice of asceticism as represented in the *Mbh.*

In the *Mbh.*, asceticism comes out as a typically male activity. Its connection – almost exclusive – with males and maleness makes an analysis of it essential for the study of masculinity. Brahmanical tradition denies women the right to asceticism or monasticism (Ramaswamy 1997:9). Because such women chose an independent, celibate, and therefore non-procreative path, they were not approved by Brahmanism

(Ray 1999: 172). Satyavatī is the only woman in the *Mbh.* who is actually encouraged by a man to renounce (1.119.5-11).<sup>1</sup>

There are three broad categories of ascetics that figure in the *Mbh.* In the first category are ascetics like Vyāsa; Vasiṣṭha; Viśvāmitra and Durvāsa. These ascetics have reached a stage from where they cannot be dislodged; they are ‘perennial ascetics’ and need not perform further asceticism. Their most distinguishable trait is their power to grant boons and curses. In the second category may be placed people like Arjuna; Sunda and Upasunda; Mandapāla, Bhagīratha; Yavakṛita; Sāvitrī and Ambā. They are ‘temporary ascetics’ and perform asceticism of achieving a specific goal; asceticism is abandoned after achieving the goal. They are ascetics with a specific target. The goals are varied and range from procuring weapons to progeny. The last category consists of people performing asceticism as a result of renunciation following the *āśrama* rules. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Gāndhārī and Kuntī can be seen as such examples.

This chapter purports to be a gendered study of the male ascetic in the *Mbh.* and seeks to bring out the relation between asceticism and masculinity by studying the qualities attributed to ascetics and male asceticism. My effort is to understand the import of these ascetic qualities. In addressing ourselves to such issues we will have to scrutinize these

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<sup>1</sup> However, this was when Satyavatī had grown old and was past her child-bearing age. (Ray 1999:176).

ascetic attributes and explore the ways in which these attributes are constructed. I begin by examining the portrayal of celibacy in the *Mbh.*

### ***Valorising and compromising celibacy***

The *Mbh.* at several places recognizes celibacy as central to asceticism, and yet, examples of ascetics flouting this integral tenet are numerous. The ascetic in the *Mbh.* figures in many procreative roles and is depicted as sexually active. In all instances of this violation of the vow of celibacy, by the male ascetic, nowhere is the act condemned, nor does the ascetic lose any of his powers. It is, however, mentioned that the ascetic powers dwindle on such violation, but this doesn't prevent the ascetic from performing more asceticism and accumulating more powers (*tapas*). Of the three grades of ascetics mentioned above, celibacy is compromised at some point or the other by all of them. My attempt in this section is to explain why celibacy for the male ascetic is so ambiguously constructed and the implications of this compromise for masculinity.

As stated above, the male ascetics in the *Mbh.* are depicted as sexually active and occur in many procreative roles. Parāśara has sexual intercourse with Satyavati while he is on a pilgrimage (1.99.10). Jaratkāru succumbs to the pressure from his ancestors for progeny and gets married (1.45.13). Even Vyāsa, the seer *par excellence* in the *Mbh.* agrees to compromise with his celibacy, through on Satyavati's request (1.105.37-39). Vyāsa's case is interesting, as he gives Gāndhāri a boon of having a

hundred sons (1.107.7-8); that is to say, directly abetted a procreative act. He is also the one who informed the Pāṇḍavas about Draupadi's Svayamvara (1.187.1-2) which can again be read as promoting something potentially procreative. This power of granting boons for sons is also seen in the case of Durvāsa's boons to Kuntī (1.111.4-6). Karve (1995: 44-45) reads this as an act of sexual favour on the part of Kuntī. In any case, this question may probably have haunted the audience. Even Vasistha fathers Aśmaka on Kalmāṣapāda's queen Madayanti. Vasistha had set Kalmāṣapāda free from a curse and the latter requested Vasistha to beget children for the furtherance of Ikṣvaku lineage. This again may be interpreted as an act of sexual favour (1.179.44-45).

Parāśara's case is interesting, because he himself expresses willingness to engage in sexual intercourse, after speaking sweet things with great gentleness; which is different from other cases, where some sort of external cause or pressure is held responsible for the breach of celibacy. Significantly, this is one of the rare cases where the text admits that the breach was a result of lust. The male ascetic is hardly described as lustful.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, expatiations on the lustful and insatiable desires of women are numerous. Bhaṅgasvana, who had been changed to a woman by Indra, and granted a boon once more by Indra, chose to remain a woman: The reason Bhaṅgasvana gave was that women experience greater pleasure

<sup>2</sup> The *Mbh.* However, does talk of the lustful nature of men (non ascetics). See 4.23.5; 1.116.10 talks of *maithundharmeṇa* or the law of copulation; 1.92.5

in sexual intercourse than men (13.12.47). Similarly, Aṣṭavakra tells the old woman:

Indeed, women are fond of sexual intercourse. Under the influence of passion, they do not care about father, mother or family, or about husbands or sons. Even old women are tormented by the desire for sexual union (13.20.53-66).

Ironically, the only conspicuous celibate in the *Mbh.* (who is not an ascetic), shows a deep knowledge about the nature of women. Thus, Bhiṣma states that women are never satisfied with one person, and never missed an opportunity to enjoy sexual union. (13.40.9).

There is yet another set of examples where the ascetics figure in procreative roles even when they don't engage in sexual intercourse. Smith (1991:84) has called this parthenogenesis, or conception without a conjunction of sexual gametes. Male parthenogenic births in the *Mbh.* occurs without mothers as bearers or holders of seeds.<sup>3</sup> Such births are called *ayonya* or non-womb births. Non womb births characterize Kṛpa (1.120), Droṇa (1.121) and Skanda (3.213-218, 9.43).<sup>4</sup> The seer Bhāradvāja's seed burst forth when he saw the *apsarā* Ghṛtācī. He placed his seed in a trough<sup>5</sup> from which Droṇa was born. Gautama too spilled his

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<sup>3</sup> Retas

<sup>4</sup> For other *ayonya* births, see, 13.18.6;3.197.16;12.321.38;1.3.16

<sup>5</sup> Kosambi (1956:97) states that the jar represents the womb of some pre-Aryan goddess.

seed on seeing the *apsarā* Jalpādi; the seed fell on a reed stock and a pair of twins Kṛpa and Kṛpi were born.

There are other examples which deny any role to female fertility in reproduction. Śrucāvati is born from the seed of Bhāradvāja, collected in a cup made of leaves (9.47.57).<sup>6</sup> Vyāsa sees the *apsara* Ghr̥tāci and spills his seed leading to the birth of Śuka (12.3.111.5). Adrikā, who is in the form of a fish gives birth to human twins after swallowing the semen of Vasu (1.57.48). There is another story where a mare drinks the water containing the semen of Vibhāṇḍaka. She becomes pregnant and a human is born (3.100). In another episode, Kuṅiganga is created by the power of her father's mind (9.51-3).

Some points need to be driven home from the above examples. One; ascetics do have involuntary orgasms, and the seed somehow gets miraculously transformed into a (mostly male) human. Two, the above examples underplay and devalue the female birthing process. Notwithstanding these significant and constant violations of celibacy by ascetics, celibacy for males in the *Mbh.* is valorized.

The importance of celibacy for the ascetic is emphasized at various places in the *Mbh.*, and there is also present a dominant discourse on semen retention. Like asceticism, its cardinal aspect, i.e. celibacy, is regarded as a

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<sup>6</sup> Also note the Manu episode for parthenogenic births (3.185.30)

source of great power. However, the *Mbh.* doesn't have any great celibates except Bhīṣma, who again is not an ascetic. Why is such an emphasis placed on celibacy for the ascetics when hardly anybody seems to be observing it? The ascetic powers of the ascetic remain intact on losing celibacy. Why then should celibacy be valorized? Jaratkāru is described as an ascetic of controlled sexual desire, always engaged in austere penances, and a man of rigid vows (1.45.13).<sup>7</sup> Jaratkāru's own aim was to keep his sexual desire under complete control, and take his whole body to the other world. But, he ends up getting married to Vāsuki's sister. Celibacy here, seems to have been linked to the attainment of heaven for the ascetic.

In the Ādi Parvan, a *gandharva* told Arjuna about the power of celibacy when the latter defeated the former in a fight:

Chastity is the highest law, and this law lies firmly lodged with you. That is the reason you defeated me in this fight Pārtha. (1.59.13)<sup>8</sup>

Here, we notice that celibacy seems linked to physical prowess and aggression. It is said in the context of Vasīṣṭha that lust and wrath, invincible even to the immortals, were defeated by his austerities and massaged his feet. (1.164.1).

The very fact that the gods get alarmed by the practice of asceticism and send *apsarās* to thwart the *tapasyā*, suggests that asceticism was

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<sup>7</sup> *Saṅgīta*

<sup>8</sup> *Brahmacarya paro dharma sa cāpi niyatsavayii*



regarded as a great power; and asceticism required celibacy among other things. Viśvāmitra, bitterly mortified India himself by his austerities and the latter had to send Menakā to impede his asceticism by seducing the ascetic (1.66.1). Initially, Menakā was reluctant to go saying that she was afraid of Viśvāmitra's great heat (*tap*). Similarly, Indra sent Tilottamā to obstruct the austerities of the *raksasas* Sunda and Upasunda (1.201.1).

Having taken the vow of lifelong celibacy, Devavrata received the appellation Bhiṣma. The *apsarās*, the celestials and various ascetics poured flowers on him from the firmament on having taken this vow. He also received from his father, the boon of dying at will (1.100.96-101). Clearly, the gods themselves were impressed by his vow. Even male parthenogenic births, something we've already discussed, may be taken as evidence for valorizing celibacy, as no sexual intercourse takes place. However, the text considers only those males as pure celibates (there aren't any except Bhisma) who have never spilled their seed. The accent is always on preserving semen. Thus, Duḥśanta shouts at Śakuntalā in disbelief, when the latter said that Viśvāmitra begot her on the apsara Menaka. Duḥśanta exclaims:

The reverend lord has never spilled his seed.

On the other hand, celibacy for women is condemned. Kuṇigarga's story declares celibacy a sin. From childhood itself she had decided to be an ascetic. She is told that she can reach heaven only if she marries.

Therefore, she marries Śṛṅgavat and spends a night with him. Next morning she goes to heaven (9.51.5.21). This episode should be seen in stark contrast to Jaratkāru's, where the latter considers celibacy as essential to the attainment of heaven. While the male ascetics in the *Mbh.* are described as great celibates, they are simultaneously described as very virile. In fact, the virility of the ascetic is as much highlighted as his celibacy.

Asceticism and masculinity in the *Mbh.* are related in a lot of ways. In fact, virility is mentioned in connection with a number of ascetics. Jaratkāru, an ascetic of controlled sexual desire, always engaged in austere penances (*tapas*), and a man of rigid vows, is at the same time described as famous in this world for his virility (1.45.13).<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Satyavati speaks of Parasara as somebody who mastered<sup>10</sup> her with his virility (*Pauruṣeya*) (1.99.10). Clearly, in the above two cases, *pauruṣeya* implies both physical and sexual processes. Even Vāladhi is described as a virile seer<sup>11</sup>, who did austerities to have an immortal son (3.136.3). The sage Dīrghatamas, despite being blind and old, is described as virile, so much so that he begot eleven sons on the old nurse of Sudeṣṇā (1.104.39-42).<sup>12</sup> The *Mbh.* itself takes such acts by old men as displeasing to the girl, which enables me to

<sup>9</sup> *loke vikhyātapauruṣottama*

<sup>10</sup> *Vasmanyat*

<sup>11</sup> *Valadhirnāma vīryavan*

<sup>12</sup> For other virile seers, see, Brhaspati (1.98.7); Vibhāṅḍaka of never-failing virility (3.110.10); Dhanuṣāṅkṣa (3.136.9)

read these acts as entailing some degree of force. It is recognized in the *Mbh.* that a sexagenarian<sup>13</sup> displeases a girl (3.6.15). At another place the *Mbh.* states:

As a husband of sixty years can never be agreeable to a young wife, so instruction is not agreeable to this chief of the Bhārata race. (2.64.14).

Thus, in the sexual act, force (*bala*) is recognized as an element of *pauruṣeya*. The fact that this is being highlighted in connection with ascetics, who are supposed to have conquered their desires, is even more interesting.

Asceticism in the *Mbh.* is further masculinised by describing it in rather physically rigorous terms. The rigour or physical exertion that the act entails, is sought to be downplayed in the case of female ascetics. For Savitri, asceticism meant fasting for (only) three days; for Arjuna, three months; and for Rāvaṇa, standing on one leg for a thousand years (3.295.3; 3.167.15; 3.274.16). Thus, asceticism is regarded as a source of power, which is also the reason that celibacy is valorized. But the fact remains that celibacy is compromised with by various ascetics. How does the text explain this occasional, yet cardinal breach. I believe that the explanations of this breach (the text's and mine) are significant in their implications for masculinity.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ṣaṣṭivarsa*

The *Mbh.* has stock and ready excuses for justifying the breach of celibacy. Pressure for producing progeny, from ancestors, is the reason given in the case of Jaratkāru. Vyāsa's case is a similar one, through he is pressurized by his mother to do so. Vasiṣṭha does so on the request by a ksatriya king Kalmāṣapāda. In the case of Viśvāmitra, it was Indra who may be held responsible, as the latter felt threatened by the burgeoning asceticism of the former. Parāśara's case is the most significant as it clearly recognizes lust as a cause of the breach. Theoretically, the parthenogenic cases cannot be regarded as violative of celibacy, but the tremendous accent that the text places on the preservation of semen suggests that even an involuntary and non-vaginal orgasm would result in a diminution of the ascetic powers.<sup>14</sup> The point that should be emphasized here is that the seed alone has the power of being transformed into a child, and any role to feminine generative powers is denied. Scholars have reasoned this compromise with celibacy by connecting it with various factors.

One explanation is that by popularizing asceticism and ascetic practices, the heterodox sects forced the assimilation of ascetic principles into Brahmanical thought and tradition. A manifestation of this was the characterization of *saṁnyāsa* as the fourth *āśrama*. The incorporation of ascetic principles into Brahmanism conflicted with its other major goal, procreation, and was reflected in the tension between the ascetic way and

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<sup>14</sup> And by implication masculinity

the householder way of life. (Jamison 1996: 16-17). The fragile asceticism and the ascetic's non-celibate status may be explained by this formulation. Wendy Doniger (1973:37), has concluded that ascetic practices culminate in erotic rewards. The ascetic is seen as an object of desire due to his practice of chastity, which leads to the amassing of sexual powers. She further states that chastity is considered insufficient by Brahmanism and the *tapas* of a man without a son is reduced. Bhattacharya (1975:61) suggests that the representation of asceticism arises out of a complexity and variation in ascetic practices themselves. It has further been stated that the ascetic's demonstration of sexual prowess is not a contradiction in terms: in fact it demonstrates his complete control over body functions, since ideally the emission of semen is prohibited to him. (Thapar 2000: 903) Olivelle (1993:103;15) has found 160 occurrences of the term *āśrama* in the *Mbh.*, and suggests that the centrality and superiority of the householder was a crucial element. In the Śānti parvan, the householder's *āśrama* is praised as the only great *āśrama* (12.11.15). It is also regarded as the most difficult of asramas 12.61.10-17).<sup>15</sup>

These arguments try to explain the contradiction that is present in the performance of asceticism. These arguments may be valid, but are peripheral to my concern. One, these arguments hardly dwell upon the gendered nature of the ascetic. Two, they focus on why the ascetic is a non-

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<sup>15</sup> The didactic parvans emphasize the *gr̥hastha āśrama* more than asceticism which is valorized in the narrative portions

celibate, but not on why he is described as a virile creature. Finally, I am also interested in examining the implications of the nature of asceticism for masculinity rather than doing a causal analysis of his behaviour.

I agree with Doniger when she says that ascetic practices culminate in erotic rewards, but would like to add that his virility derives from the fact of the ascetic's seminal retention. Seminal retention itself was a symbol of male power and self control. So much so that seminal retention is linked to a lot of powers, such as physical prowess (1.59.13), knowledge (1.39.8;3.13.45) and even the attainment of heaven. No wonder, all ascetics desire to preserve their seed. Even the Sanskrit pun on *tejas* as brilliance or semen is given a third twist, brilliance in the sense of intellectual power.(Doniger 2000:48) All the parthenogenic cases of male ascetics may be read as examples of privileging of the seed. Thus, the seed by itself has the power of reproduction. Alternatively, it can be read that so much is the importance of the seed that even when involuntarily spilled, it should necessarily lead to procreation, and not be wasted (1.98.7). A variant of the above mentioned parthenogenic births are the cases where the males themselves become pregnant, as in the legend of Māndhātā (3.126.23). Efforts are made in the *Mbh.* towards quantifying asceticism, with phrases such as 'huge pile of austerities'<sup>16</sup> (1.64.29); painfully gathered asceticism (1.38.8); and a wastage of austerities' (3.95.22) being used. Therefore, the

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<sup>16</sup> *Taporaśinthavyayam*

ascetic's virility stems from his celibacy, which in turn means semen retention. Male-sexuality is depicted as a socially positive force, and the seed could be used as a creative; soteriological and aggressive force. While *pauruṣeya* results from preserving semen, it was also a creative power. The didactic statement that lack of sexual intercourse ages women also points towards the fertile power of men. (5.39.63)<sup>17</sup> The fact that the gods and nubile *apsarās* to thwart the *tapasyā* of the tapasvis, by seducing them, also points towards the fact that more than anything else, the ascetic powers were a product of the ascetic's celibacy. Otherwise, why necessarily an *apsarā* was sent to impede the ascetic's *tapasyā*: there could be any number of ways of obstructing asceticism. What imperiled the gods was the celibate status of the ascetic which in turn arose from seminal retention.

Many masculine qualities are represented in the *Mbh.* as arising out of seminal retention. There are two prominent cases where loss of semen is connected with the loss of life. It is stated that king Vyuṣitāśva, had a wife called Bhadrā Kākṣivati. They lusted after each other, and mad with lust for her, he succumbed to consumption (1.112.6). Similarly, it is stated for Vicitravīrya that being too greatly attached to his wife he succumbed to exhaustion (5.145.24). The name Vicitravīrya itself is quite suggestive of his actions (literally meaning strange semen). Brahmanic *tapas* and

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<sup>17</sup> *Asāmbhogo jarā strīṇām*

ksatriyaic *tejas* are both symbolized by heat, which obviously had sexual connotations.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra is said to have told about Arjuna that the latter glows with ksatriyaic prowess and might, as he had been chaste from his boyhood (5.57.1). Fire itself is described as golden-spermed (*hiranyaretas*, 1.50.10). Importantly, Arjuna received the *gāṇḍīva* and his quivers from fire. There seems to be a clear link between celibacy/potency and aggression, and the *Mbh.* treats cowardice and impotence as synonymous.

Patanjali in his *Yogasutras* is emphatic that one gains energy through continence (Chandra 1963:86).<sup>18</sup>

### ***Boons as boosters and curses as curbers of masculinity***

We have seen that asceticism was regarded as a source of power. But how is this power manifested? A major way of exercising this power comes from the ascetic's ability to grant boons and hurl curses. However, not all ascetics have the power to give boons and curses. It is only the first category of 'permanent ascetics', that we have already talked about, who have this power. This power, I contend, gives a masculine identity to the ascetic. Not too many women in the *Mbh.* curse, and still fewer give boons. In this section, I will analyse the narrative context of boons and curses, and examine the extent to which boons and curses contribute to the

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<sup>18</sup> Brahmacharya pratisthayanvīryalābhaḥ



construction of masculinity. Also important is the question that who is entitled to a boon and who deserves to be cursed.

Satyavatī could not resist the advances of Parāśara, fearing the latter's curses, and eager for the boons he might give. It is, therefore, seen that boons and curses were a power that the ascetic could use to his advantage (1.99.10). A similar case is that of Yavakṛita, who engaged in sexual intercourse with the daughter-in-law of the ascetic Raivya. The maiden did not object as she feared the curse of Yavakṛita (3.136.4). Another notable point in the above two cases, is that the desire for love is purely driven by lust, and no external causes, such as pressure for progeny from ancestors is noticed; which we see in the case of Jaratkāru and Vyāsa. Kuntibhoja instructed Kuntī̄ to look after all the comforts of the rsi Durvasa, as the latter was capable of bestowing boons (3.302.28). Karve has suggested, as we have already noted, that this may have included sexual favours on the part of Kuntī̄. What then becomes clear, is that the ascetic could use the power of boons and curses for sexual gratification. Alternatively, but for these powers, the women involved in the above cases would have resisted the act which is clearly a forced one. We have already noted that how force (*bala*) was an important element of *pauruṣeya*. Thus put, boons and curses, do provide a masculine identity to the ascetic. That such resistance could be deleterious is proved from the fact that Vyāsa

intercourse with Ambikā and Ambalikā<sup>19</sup> produced imperfect (men); and only when the submission was total, that of the maid; was a perfect man (Vidura), born (1.100.1-19). Ascetics gave boons when they were thoroughly pleased as Durvāsa was with Kuntī.

The boons that ascetics gave to women are mainly those that helped produce sons. Gāndhārī seeks a boon from Vyāsa that she bear a hundred sons (1.107.7-8) Vyāsa is, thus, involved in acts of procreation; both directly as we have noted above; and indirectly, by means of providing boons. This is in concordance with the masculine power of fecundity, we spoke of in the above section; a power which is valorized often at the expense of female procreative powers, and often by a total denial of female generative powers. Similarly, Durvāsa's boons to Kuntī related to producing sons. In other words, the masculine fertile power is sought to be perpetuated through the medium of boons. Such examples of ascetic's giving boons to women for producing sons may be multiplied, and the evidence from the above cases is generalisable. The boons that men crave for are mostly weapons, the import of which has been dealt in the first chapter. Suffice to say that weapons are indices of power, and in a way, crucial to the making of masculinity. Examples of women giving boons hardly exist. The study of curses, however, is much more interesting, since both men and women use this power.

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<sup>19</sup> Their unwillingness is apparent: Ambikā shuts her eyes and Ambalikā becomes pale with fear.

Among the curses, the case of Pāṇḍu is very interesting. Pāṇḍu, while roaming in the forest, shot a deer, coupling with its mate. It turned out that the deer was a greatly effulgent ascetic, with his wife. The ascetic, Kimḍama, then cursed Pāṇḍu, saying that whenever Pāṇḍu would approach a female with the object of intercourse, he would fall dead (1.110.20). The curse, therefore, as opposed to boons is related to sterility, rather than fertility. It is also an attack on Pāṇḍu's masculinity, if by that we mean that he will not be able to procreate. Pāṇḍu, therefore, is enforced to adopt brahmacharya which makes it more interesting – as opposed to the valorization of celibacy and asceticism in the epic; here is a case where celibacy is enforced and regarded as a burden. Masculine powers (procreation and sexual intercourse) are forcibly curbed. Kuntī, is then pressed by Pāṇḍu to have children.(1.3.16)<sup>20</sup> This is not the only example where male procreative powers are curbed as the result of a curse.

Rāvaṇa was cursed by the ascetic Nalakuvera, to the effect that if he would have sexual intercourse with any woman against her will, his head would surely be split into a hundred fragments. (3.290.33). The case is similar to that of Pāṇḍu, except the fact that the check on Rāvaṇa's sexual prowess was a limited one where he was rendered incapable of forcibly violating any woman (3.279.60). The notable point is that; here, too; a curse is used to curb the masculine powers of a male. Rāvaṇa was cursed

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<sup>20</sup> Pāṇḍu tells Kuntī that it is to beget children that the best of men are born in the world.

for having committed rape on his own daughter-in-law; Rambhā. There are some other examples of curses involving ascetics and having an effect on masculinity.

Yayāti was cursed by Uṣanas whereby terrible decrepitude and old age would overcome the former. Yayāti, was, then deprived of his youth. Yayāti, then pleaded to Uṣanas:

O son of Bhṛgu, I have not been as yet satiated with youth or Devayāni (1.83.32-39).

A reprieve was given by Uṣanas, whereby Yayāti could transfer his decrepitude to whoever he liked. Purū; Yayāti's son, agreed to take upon himself the decrepitude of his father (1.84.30). However, the excuses which other sons give, are illuminating. Turvāsu declined, saying that decrepitude destroys all pleasures and enjoyments, strength and beauty. (1.84.11). Druhyū refused his father's request, saying that if he is decrepit, he won't be able to enjoy horses or women (1.84.19) Having received the youth of Purū, Yayāti again indulged in the pleasures of life. He sported with the apsarā Visvāci in the garden of Indra. (1.85.9). After a thousand years, Yayāti received back his own old age, and his son Purū also received back his youth. Here again, we see the emasculating effects of an ascetic's curse. This strengthens our thesis of fertile boons and sterile curses.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Also note the Cyavana episode, where Sukanyā makes her husband young with the help of Asvins.

Another interesting example of a curse relating to emasculation involves a non-ascetic, Urvāṣī. However, the cursed, ie. Arjuna, is valorized in the epic as a great ascetic. In the Indralokagamana episode, Urvāṣī goes to Arjuna's abode at night and discovers to him her passion. Arjuna declines to gratify her and is cursed by the latter, whereby Arjuna would have to live among women, losing all respect, becoming a dancer, and being deprived of manhood (3.44.50-59). However, Arjuna's case will be dealt in greater detail in the following section where he will be studied as a typical ksatriya ascetic with katriyaic ideals of masculinity. The above example is also significant because the curse is hurled by a woman on a man. We had noted earlier that women don't give boons, but there are quite a few examples where women given curses.

Kadrū cursed her sons, the snakes, for disobeying her. According to the curse, in the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya, Agni would consume them all (1.18.6-8). The efficacy of the mother's curse is paramount, as all other curses are said to have cures (1.33.4). Gāndhārī curses Kṛṣṇa after the war with the extinction of the Vṛṣṇis (11.25.41). However, the power of women to curse, springs from their virginity; and fidelity to their husband. Thus, Damayāntī cursed the hunter, invoking her fidelity to Nala

If even in my mind have I thought of any other person than the king of Niṣādhas, then let this puny one living by hunting, fall down devoid of life (3.60.35).

Similarly, Draupadī cites her fidelity to the Pāṇḍavas for rendering Kīcaka incapable of overpowering her (4.14.19). Thus, the woman is empowered by her goodness.

It is boons, that women are not capable of bestowing. The above three examples also suggest that the curses of women were fatal, life devouring, unlike men's which are rarely so. The text tries to portray fecundity as a masculine preserve and this gets reflected in the boons and curses, which may again be tied with the discourse on privileging the seed. On the contrary, women, by virtue of their curses are shown as life-takers. Boons are life-giving, and, therefore an extension of the male powers of fertility, which often appropriates the feminine powers as well.

Regarding the curses on men, it is noteworthy that quite a few of them are related to the crippling of their procreative abilities, which only suggests the importance of male procreative powers. Such curses entailed a check on their ability to engage in sexual intercourse. The ascetics used curses as a double-edged weapon: for their sexual gratification, as suggested by numerous examples; and also for debilitating the masculinity of others.<sup>22</sup> Curses on men are confined to the domain of sexuality and weapons. Significantly, there is a dearth of examples where *apsarās* or women are cursed by ascetics for obstructing their asceticism. Thus, an ascetic cursed some *apsarās* to become crocodiles when they tried to tempt

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<sup>22</sup> By masculinity, I am implying procreative powers, as well as sexual pleasure.

the former (1.218.22). It was Arjuna, who rescued the crocodiles from the curse. Another example comes from the Anusāsana Parvan, where Visvāmitra cursed the celestial nymph Rambhā to become a rock, for disturbing his devotions (13.3.11). However, when Visvāmitra was lured by Menakā in the Ādi Parvan (1.65.40), he willingly engaged in sexual intercourse. This accent placed on the male seed and its procreative powers is also reflected in the descriptions of the *kali* age. In the *kali* age, says the *Mbh.*; men would have intercourse in women's mouths; an act obviously not conducive to procreation, hence, also a crisis for masculinity (3.188.41).<sup>23</sup> A similar attitude towards oral congress is seen the sastric text *Kāmāsutra* (II.9.21.22).

So far we've been dealing mostly with the permanent ascetics, and that too, mostly brāhmaṇas. We will now discuss the second category of 'goal-specific ascetics', who are mostly kṣatriyas. In the following section we will observe the case of Arjuna as an archetypal kṣatriya ascetic. The approach will help us observe masculinity on a different plane, and bring out whether masculinity has other conflicting ideals. Arjuna is a kṣatriya, and asceticism for him, as for women, is not a life long vocation, which makes his case even more interesting.

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<sup>23</sup> It is also stated that in the 18<sup>th</sup> year, men are overtaken by decrepitude (3.188.60)

### *Arjuna: an archetypal ksatriya ascetic*

Arjuna's objective in performing asceticism is to obtain weapons. While Arjuna will be figuring throughout this dissertation, as he embodies a lot of 'masculine' characteristics; here we are concerned only with his ascetic roles as a ksatriya. The attempt will be to assess how much of a compromise does asceticism bring to his otherwise 'masculine' image.<sup>24</sup> How different is a ksatriya ascetic's portrayal from that of a brahmanic ascetic, will be subjected to examination. Also, how binding are the rules of asceticism on a transitory ascetic'.? Finally, I will attempt to examine as to what can be said, on the whole, about the masculinity of ascetics and the relationship between masculinity and asceticism.

After the marriage of the five Pāṇḍavas with Draupadī, Nārada made a compact that anybody interrupting a brother with Draupadī shall forthwith exile himself to the forest. In accordance with the agreement, the violator had to be a *brahmacārin* in the woods for twelve years. Promptly, an occasion presents itself for Arjuna to do, when he has to go in aid of a brahmin whose cattle has been stolen. In spite of Yudhiṣṭhira's pleas, Arjuna absents himself at once, and has lovely amorous adventures. Arjuna began his twelve year brahmacarya exile by getting married to Ulūpi. He, thus, breaks his vow of brahmacarya at the slightest

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<sup>24</sup> The term is being used in its broadest sense implying procreative powers, aggression, and the ability to wield weapons



provocation, and also gets a boon from Ulūpi, making him invincible in water (1.216.36).<sup>25</sup> Arjuna's tension is noted in his statement:

King Dharma has ordered me to twelve moths of exile. How can I act so that I do you pleasure and still not violate my law (1.206.24)

No extraneous cause is ascribed to the breach, nor is Arjuna contrite about it. Having broken his vow, *fait accompli* allowed him more amorous adventures.

In the previous case, the provocation came from Ulūpi. However, by now, Arjuna was quite emboldened, and demanded from Citravāhana, the ruler of Manipur, his daughter Citrāngada. He lived in that city for three years after getting married (1.217.27). To these two marriages, he added a third one. In the first case, Ulūpi had taken the initiative; in the second one, Arjuna had placed a demand, and in the third case, he was bold enough to abduct Subhadrā.

When Arjuna first saw Subhadrā, Kṛṣṇa asked him with a smile that how come the heart of a forest-dweller turned topsy-turvy with love.<sup>26</sup> But in this marriage, unlike in the other two ones, Arjuna thought Yudhisthira's permission necessary and sent swift messengers informing him of everything. Yudhiṣṭhira promptly gave assent. That Arjuna felt, he had

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<sup>25</sup> One of the very rare instances where a woman grants boons.

<sup>26</sup> *Vanecarasya kimibam kamenalobhyate maṇa.*

done something wrong is clear, because he asks Draupadi's forgiveness when the latter reprimands him (1.223.17-19).<sup>27</sup>

Given Arjuna's propensity to take beautiful women, his denial to gratify Urvaṣī comes as a surprise.<sup>28</sup> Urvaṣī goes to Arjuna's abode at night, and discloses to him her passion. Seeing her at night, Arjuna with fear-stricken heart went forward to receive her and closed his eyes from modesty (3.46.18). Hearing her speak in heaven in this way, Arjuna was filled with great shame, and shut his ears with his hands. Urvaṣī, then cursed him that he will have to live amongst women, losing all respect, being a dancer and deprived of his manhood. Also significant is Urvasis statement, that sons and grandsons of Purū dynasty, who had reached heaven through their asceticism, sported with the apsara's without incurring any sin by doing it. Thus, the climax of asceticism was also the violation of it. Arjuna's refusal to gratify Urvaṣī was because he had held her as a motherly figure, but then, the other Purū ancestors hadn't thought so. Interestingly, Indra had ordered Citrasena to make Arjuna learned in all the arts of mixing with females along with the art of using weapons (3.45.3), in heaven.

Katz (1990:95-98) treats Arjuna's repeated breach of brahmacarya as manifestation of male fertility. The gandharvas, whose friendly relations

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<sup>27</sup> Arjuna is also said to have married the daughter of the Nāga king 6.86.6-9.

<sup>28</sup> Cited from M.N. Dutt's edition, as it is absent in the Critical Edition.

with Arjuna are shown several times in the epic are suppose to be symbols of fertility (ibid 61). However, his rejection of Urvaṣī shows that despite being a symbol of male fertility he had great self control. Thus, he accomplished what many seers failed to do. Therefore in Arjuna the epic tries to represent all the masculine ideals-aggressive, ascetic, and procreative. These ideals were unsustainable unless they violated each other.

One keeps wondering, what are the ascetic powers of Arjuna that everybody from Vyāsa to Yudhiṣṭhira keep attributing to him. Vyāsa, at one point comments – ‘He (Arjuna), is competent to see the celestials on account of his asceticism’ (3.36.31-32). Arjuna meets Indra without any severe privations, merely by traveling. On meetng Indra, Arjuna immediately makes his demand for celestial weapons. Indra, however, asks Arjuna to meet Śiva and keeps this as a condition for bestowing his weapons on Arjuna. It is now, that Arjuna is described as practicing asceticism, and he actually does, for the weapons he needed.

In order to fulfill the masculine ideal in Arjuna reality is adjusted to, but the adjustment is often much more than a giving in. The compromises which masculinity makes are reasoned and then connected with a set of conditions.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I tried to locate masculinity in asceticism, which the text represents as a 'brahmanic ideal'. Unlike the first chapter, which dealt with the attributes that make men masculine, the current chapter tried to explore the foundation of these attributes. Boons and curses are gendered and are represented as manifestations of ascetic powers. Continuing with the *varna* analysis of masculinity we notice the conflation of brahmanic and ksatriyaic ideals in Arjuna.

### Chapter Three

## EXAMINING UNMANLINESS AND OTHER MASCULINITIES

So far we have talked about masculinity in the *Mbh.* and its constitutive elements. In the process, unmanliness may have been discussed by implication. However, in the present chapter, I am doing just the opposite by turning the focus on unmanliness, and examining situations where, masculinity is ambiguously constructed. Scrutinizing the 'non-masculine', again serves to illustrate what the text considers masculine.<sup>1</sup> Since gender is a relation term, and the minimal requirement for being a man is not being a woman, we may find that in many situations, men are under pressure to constitute themselves as masculine by avoiding forms of behaviour whose connection is with women/femininity. But this is variant, which begs the question: under what circumstances does the contrast with women lose its centrality as an encumbrance on men's behaviour? When can men engage in so called 'non-masculine' acts without imperiling their constitution as men? These are some of the questions that I will be addressing. The purpose of this is to contribute to the deconstruction of the usual emphasis on sexual dimorphism.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In deciding, what is non-masculine or unmanly, I am not arbitrarily picking up qualities and terms, but adhering to the representations in the *Mbh.*

<sup>2</sup> I must clarify, that the 'non-masculine' doesn't necessarily mean the feminine.

The first section is about various references to the *klibā* throughout the *Mbh*. The focus will be on how crucial is the *klibā* to the construction of a masculine identity, and the contexts in which the term is invoked. The *klibā*, I argue, was sometimes far more important than the female in defining parameters of manhood. The next section deals with bisexual transformations and the way in which such sexual ambiguity was accommodated in the text. In the final section I address the issue of homoerotic relationships and male-bonding.

***Kliba: The perfect non-masculine entity***

Zwilling and Sweet (2000:106) have suggested that the *klibā* refers not only to impotence, but also the loss of the male gender role and the acquisition of a female one. It is, thus, used for a person of equivocal sex.<sup>3</sup> I will attempt in this section - by using the *klibā* as an analytical category - to bring out some other masculine traits. I must, however, state here that the *Mbh* does not recognize masculinity as the polar opposite of femininity, and it is for this reason that the study of the *klibā* becomes even more interesting, as often the text makes attempts to ascribe some gender to it.

The *klibā* in the *Mbh*. doesn't possess, any of the manly qualities we have discussed so far: aggression, procreative powers, anger, ascetic

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<sup>3</sup> For convenience sake, I will stick to Buitenen's rendition of the term as eunuch. However, I maintain that there is a remarkable fluidity around its meanings, and it would be incorrect to reduce it to a clear-cut sexual category, even though its meaning seems to be predicated on a sexual basis.

practices, and the ability to wield weapons. The *Mbh* treats the *klībā* as 'both man and woman', and sometimes 'neither man nor woman' (4.36.30; 5.131.30).<sup>4</sup> However, its effective use in the epic is always to denote unmanliness and not unfemininity. This is the reason, that I regard the *klībā* as a perfect non-masculine entity. Its most frequent use is in contexts which require a display of masculinity, that is, anger and aggression. Rarely, it is used in the sense of somebody lacking procreative powers or sexual prowess, even though it is one of the important inabilities of the *klībā*. In various contexts, any man, not possessing or showing the above mentioned masculine traits is labelled as the *klībā*. It often acts as a catalyst for the display of masculinity, often showing instant results, and is therefore, frequently used in that capacity. Again, it is mostly, the ksatriyas, who use this term, generally for other ksatriyas and it doesn't figure that regularly in connection with brahmins and ascetics. This suggests that the *klībā* was regarded in its non-masculine status, *inter alia* as a non-aggressive being.

Bearing his privations with equanimity, in the Vana Parvan, Yudhiṣṭhira; was chided by Bhīma saying that despair had prompted the former to the life of a eunuch (3.34.12).<sup>5</sup> Earlier, Draupadī had derided Yudhiṣṭhira's calmness by stating that a man possessed of manhood should

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<sup>4</sup> *Strīpūmans.*

<sup>5</sup> *Kincidasya yathā pumas kincidasyā yatha strīya.*

always be looking for a weak spot in others (3.33.50). Similarly, in the Bhīṣma Parvan, Kṛṣṇa had to galvanize a diffident and vacillating Arjuna in such a manner:

Don't become a eunuch Pārtha, it does not fit you (6.25.7).<sup>6</sup>

In both the above cases, the use of the term was meant to provoke aggression. This becomes even more clear in the previously referred Vidurā episode. The situation is similar, and Vidurā's son is reluctant to wage a war. Vidurā calls her son a man with the 'tools of a eunuch'. (5.131.5).<sup>7</sup> This, probably is a reference to the klibā's sexual organs, and bolsters my previous argument linking potency and aggression. In other words, masculinity is shown to be deriving from male-sexuality.<sup>8</sup> Duśāsana mocks at the Pāṇḍavas at the end of the dicing episode, saying that the pārthas are eunuchs (2.68.10).<sup>9</sup> Peeved at the honour shown to Kṛṣṇa, by Yudhiṣṭhira, Śiśupāla is said to have told Kṛṣṇa that this royal honour shown to Kṛṣṇa was like a marriage to a eunuch (2.34.21).<sup>10</sup> Later, in the same episode, he scoffed at Bhīṣma, calling him a person who lived like a eunuch (2.38.1).

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<sup>6</sup> *Klaibyam mā gamah pārtha na tat tvavy upapadyate.*

<sup>7</sup> *Klibasādhanah.*

<sup>8</sup> See Kakar (1989: 118).

<sup>9</sup> *Klibā pārthā*

<sup>10</sup> *Kliba darkrya yadyagandhe vā spadarsānam aragyo rājvatpūjā tathā te madhusūdan.*



While celibacy, in the *Mbh.* is shown to be a source of great power, it also entailed the danger of being labelled as 'impotent', and hence, a *klibā*. This is what is shown to have happened with Bhīṣma. Śiśupāla, took a jibe at Bhīṣma, and stated that the celibacy of Bhīṣma was a lie, that the latter maintained out of stupidity or impotence (2.38.24).<sup>11</sup> Continuing in this fashion he also called him as old and effeminate (2.39.8).<sup>12</sup> All this, did incite aggression, and Śiśupāla was killed by Kṛṣṇa.

The use of the term starts getting more frequent from the Udyoga Parvan onwards.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, it figures in most of the episodes where masculinity figures and the two are often contrastingly used. Rare are the instances where masculinity and femininity are juxtaposed. Trying to prod Arjuna to war, Kṛṣṇa is said to have stated:

Are you a eunuch, that dare not hope for manhood in yourself  
(5.73.19).

When Arjuna demurred to such a description, Kṛṣṇa is said to have candidly confessed, that he had used the term eunuch for 'lighting up the fire of his splendour' (5.75.20).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Klibtvāddhe.*

<sup>12</sup> *Strīsdharmā ca vṛddhaṣca.*

<sup>13</sup> In fact, it is used most often in the Udyog Parvan.

<sup>14</sup> *Tejaste sandīpayam.*

In the Virāṭa Parvan, on being kicked by Kīcaka, Drupadī is shown as yelling to the Pāṇḍavas, which also establishes the already talked about potency - manhood - aggression continuum:

How can these powerful men like castrates suffer, where has their intransigence gone! Where their virility! (4.15.20-24).<sup>15</sup>

A similar reference to the fact of Klībā's sexuality being responsible for its non-masculinity is reflected in Vidura's rather didactic harangue to Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Vidura is said to have declared that women don't want a eunuch for their husband, just as nobody wants a master whose wrath has no consequence (5.38.29).<sup>16</sup> A rather curious reference to the klībā is found in Damayanti's speech when Nala gets lost in the forest:

My Niṣādhan has no vices, he has been like a eunuch to me (3.71.15).<sup>17</sup>

This, probably, is a reference to the non-aggressive nature of the klībā, and probably adumbrating its harmlessness. In a similar reference, Sātyaki states that it was possible for a hero and a eunuch to be born in the same lineage (5.3.3).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Vīrya.*

<sup>16</sup> *Prasādo nisphalo yasya krodhascapī nirarthaka. Na tam bhartarmicchhanti sandam patimiv striya.*

<sup>17</sup> *Rahonicanuvarti ca klībavanamam naiṣadha.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ekasminneva jāyete kule klībamahārathoha.*

Like most wars, the war in the *Mbh* is depicted as an all - male enterprise, and it is here that the *klība* figures more frequently as masculinity is sought to be constantly invoked. Droṇa is said to have remonstrated with Yudhiṣṭhira 'like a eunuch' for not fighting the war from his side (7.43.51). Duryodhana is said to have declared to Kṛpa that this was the time for fighting, and not acting like a eunuch (9.5.25).

The *klība* is sometimes referred to - in a despicable manner - as somebody who can never have children. Procreation, we have already noted, is regarded as a sign of virility and also depicted as a form of masculine power. The Śānti Parvan states that a eunuch can never enjoy wealth, never have children (12.14.12). Similarly, in the Anusāsana Parvan, Bhīṣma compares frustration with the frustrated hopes of a eunuch about children (13.9.3).<sup>19</sup>

There are references in the *Mbh*. of a person of indeterminate or equivocal sex, without actually using the word *Klība*. However, the sense of the usage is pejorative and connotes utter shamelessness. Conveying his sense of jealousy at the burgeoning fortunes of the Pandavas, Duryodhana is made to declare:

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<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that in the didactic portions, the *klība* figures more as a non-procreative being, rather than as a non aggressive one, as in the narrative portions. I have stated earlier that aggression is represented more as a ksatriyaic quality. The didactic portions conform more to brahmanical views. Impotence, and obsession with progeny, as also lack of virility, is frequently depicted in association with *ksatriya* kings and rarely with brahmanical ascetics, who are shown as much too virile. Pāṇḍu and Victiranvīrya are cases in point. See chapter 2.

If I were to tolerate the fortune that has befallen them, I would be neither a woman, nor not a man; neither a man, nor not a woman.

Conveying a similar meaning, Sanjaya states that a shameless person is neither woman nor more, he has no title to law and becomes like a *śūdra* (5.70.37).<sup>20</sup> Vidurā, in the famous speech to her son, the rājā of Sindhu, **spurs** him, saying that if a person doesn't perform miraculous manly acts, then he is neither man nor woman (5.131.19).<sup>21</sup>

Some of the philosophical portions of the *Mbh*, recognise the existence of a third sex. Brāhman is said to be as neither male, nor female, nor of the neuter sex (12.201.28) (12.250.22). Similarly, Rudra is said to be bearing the marks of both the sexes (13.14.222). The multiple meanings of the *klibā* and the multiple contexts in which this term is invoked points towards multiple masculinities. This sexual ambiguity is further problematized in the following section where I discuss two cases of bisexual transformation in the epic, viz., the Arjuna/Brhannaḍā and the Ambā/Sikhaṇḍin.

### ***Bisexual Transformations: Sexual ambiguity and textual accommodation***

Arjuna, we have seen so far, is indubitably the most interesting and rich character for a study of masculinity. In a sense, we may call him the most 'masculine' character in the epic. His masculinity is rich in all the

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<sup>20</sup> Note the *varṇa* dimension of masculinity.

<sup>21</sup> Naiva strī na puṇa pumaṇ.

masculine attributes: ascetic, aggressive, and procreative, though it is a different case that these attributes are conflicting, and one particular attribute is achieved at the cost of the other. The rich plurality of masculinity, is epitomised in Arjuna. This gives to his character, a typical tension, but a tension that is seminal for the ideal to be the actual. We will now see Arjuna in an atypical situation, where his masculinity itself is compromised and his sexuality is ambiguous.

In the Virāṭa Parvan, in the incognito phase of the exile, Arjuna offers his services stating to Yudhiṣṭhira:

Sire, I am a transvestite, I will be a woman<sup>22</sup> (4.2.20)

Arjuna, goes under the name Bṛhannaḍā, which literally means a ‘big-reed’. Doniger (2000:281), calls his assumed name, a ‘phallic joke’. It is interesting to note that though Arjuna parades as a eunuch, with at least, the appearance of a man, he adopts a feminine name.<sup>23</sup> In fact, as eunuch transvestites, a major identification is made between *hijrās* and Arjuna. Serena Nanda (1994: 375) states that the portrayal of Arjuna in popular enactments of *Mbh* in a vertically divided half-man, half woman form highlights this identification.

It must, however, be borne in mind – and it is critical to my analysis – that unlike Ambā, the pre-transformed status of Arjuna is that of a male.

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<sup>22</sup> *Ṣaṅḍako smīti.*

<sup>23</sup> I read this as an attempt to impute femininity to the *klība*.

Even in the transformed status of Arjuna, I contend, it is his masculinity that protrudes than any other quality. It is his masculine identity that is constantly sought to be underscored.

Initially, it is his anxiety over hiding his masculine appearance, his bow scarred arms (4.36.43). He states that it does not fit him to be a eunuch. Crying in disbelief, Virāṭa is said to have told him:

No man of your stature resembles a eunuch (4.10.7)<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the Virāṭa Parvan, people react to his appearance with incredulity. He is described as thick haired and crested, but wrongly attired (4.10.6).<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, he is described as having something of a woman and something of a man (4.36.30).<sup>26</sup> He is shown to have an expertise with horses (4.35.6).

When fighting against the Kauravas, Uttara is led to exclaim about Arjuna:

By what quirk of fate could a man of such virile appearance, and the marks of manhood become a eunuch (4.40.10).<sup>27</sup>

Later, when the war is won, Uttara, told Virāṭa:

Such splendid men are not eunuchs on earth (4.40.14).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> *Navamvidhā klibarūpa bhavanti.*

<sup>25</sup> *Sikhīsukeśa paridhāya canyathā.*

<sup>26</sup> *Kincidasya yathā pūmsa kincidasya yathā striya.*

<sup>27</sup> *Evam virāṅgarūpasya lakṣaṇerucitasya ca kena karmavipākena klibat vamiḍmāgatam.*

<sup>28</sup> *Na hīdyasā klibarūpā bhavantīh narottamā.*

Finally, when the real identity of the Pāṇḍavas is revealed, it is to Arjuna that Virāṭa offers his daughter Uttarā in marriage, in tune with his womanizing ventures elsewhere in the epic. Arjuna refuses, but the ground of refusal is intriguing. Arjuna says that it won't be a right thing as people might suspect his pre-martial liaison with Uttarā. This is obviously an insinuation to his sexually-active / procreative status even in his transformed role.

On the other hand, the case of Ambā/Śikhaṇḍin is a different one. One has to remember, that in this case the pre-transformed status of Śikhaṇḍin was that of a female. The Ambā legend, says Buitenen (1973: 178), has no Vedic provenance, and is entirely epigonic in character. The story is told in fragments scattered throughout the epic. Śikhaṇḍin is described as a female male (5.189.2).<sup>29</sup> While in the case of Arjuna, the transformation was rather smooth, and ascribed to a curse, in Ambā's case it was more complicated. It came after severe asceticism, and was the result of a boon. (5.188.13)

The process of the transformation itself is rather insightful for a study of masculinity. Even in her next birth in the house of Drupada, initially, Ambā was born as a woman. It was the Yakṣa, Sthūṇa that changed her into a man to do her a favour. The fact of her being a female

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<sup>29</sup> *Stripumans.*

is continually driven in, just as in the case of Arjuna/Bṛhannaḍā, it was the masculinity of Arjuna that was being emphasized.

After Śālva refused to accept Ambā, stating that she was somebody else's woman and abducted property, Ambā decided to take revenge on Bhīṣma, either by austerities or battle (5.173.9). After performing severe asceticism, she got a boon from Umā **for** killing Bhīṣma. However, Ambā is shown as taking exception to the fact, stating:

How can it be that I, a woman will triumph in battle, for since I am a woman, my heart is meek to its core (5.188.8).

It was now, that Umā, modified the boon, stating that Ambā shall attain manhood, and slay Bhīṣma in battle (5.188.13).<sup>30</sup> Ambā's femininity became an obstacle once more when she was married and passed off as a male despite being a female.<sup>31</sup> Ashamed, she went to the forest and declared to the Yakṣa Sthūṇa that she was totally disgusted at being a woman, and had resolved to become a man (5.188.6). Ambā and Sthūṇa, then exchanged their sexual organs (5.193.1).

Bhīṣma's declaration that he shall not shoot arrows at a woman, a former woman, and an apparent woman. (5.193.3), which he keeps repeating, even when the war begins only serves to accent the former

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<sup>30</sup> Manhood is portrayed as being essential to aggression

<sup>31</sup> Śikhaṇḍin's desire for a sex change is motivated not only by the wish for revenge but because of her marriage to another girl. Thus manhood is portrayed in both aggressive and sexual terms.



feminine status of Śikhaṇḍin. There are numerous references to Śikhaṇḍin's femininity during the war. The act of slaying Bhīṣma by him is described by Dhṛtarāṣṭra as that of a lion killed by a Jackal (6.15.18). Arjuna is shown as protecting him even when Śikhaṇḍin is supposed to strike Bhīṣma (6.108.103). Śikhaṇḍin's arrows shot at Bhīṣma, failed to produce the slightest pain in the latter (6.120.48). Finally, when Arjuna placed Śikhaṇḍin before him and began to pierce Bhīṣma with arrows, the latter is said to have declared:

Surely, these cannot be Śikhaṇḍin's arrows (6.120.59).

Ultimately, it became a contest between Bhīṣma and Arjuna alone, and Śikhaṇḍin had no role to play. It is noteworthy, that after the transformation, Śikhaṇḍin has all the attributes of a man – he produces children, and is a noted warrior. Thus, Bhīṣma's refusal to accept Śikhaṇḍin as a man suggests the impossibility to cross the gender line even via rebirth. Thus, even in his biological male status, Śikhaṇḍin's attributes are portrayed as feminine.

Thus, the textual accommodation of the sexual ambiguity lies in the skewed portrayal of the ambiguous characters. Arjuna's masculinity and Śikhaṇḍin's femininity come out rather clearly even in the transformed status.

Given the strongly masculine character of the epic, one is curious about the portrayal of male-male relationships in it, and I have tried to examine this in the final section of this chapter.

***Homoerotic relations and masculinity: violative or celebrative***

Let me begin by clarifying, terms. By a homoerotic relationship I am implying a primary and passionate attachment' between two persons of the same sex, which 'may or may not be acted upon sexually' (Vanita 2000: XIII). The fact that I am discussing this in the last section of the last chapter is not to belittle its importance for masculinity. That I have placed this section in the chapter on unmanliness and other masculinities needs some explanation. I believe that a focus on the homoerotic dimension is essential, because while male bonding may be the ultimate celebration of male bodies and masculinity, it also violates the notion on which masculinity is created and assumes meaning.<sup>32</sup> After all, both patriarchy and masculinity are in a way predicated on heterosexuality. I will attempt to explain that to what extent does the text consider homoerotic behaviour to be transgressive for male behaviour and masculine identities. Patriarchy and masculinity are interlinked, and for sustaining patriarchy, masculinity has to be displayed. To this extent, homosexuality may pose a danger to patriarchy. However, my concern here is not merely homosexuality, but I

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<sup>32</sup> The *Kāmasūtra* places homosexuals under the category of *klība*, and also uses the word *tr̥tya prakṛiti* for them (2.9.6-9).

am viewing it within the broader framework of homeroticism, with a focus on male friendship and male bonding.

The epic offers quite a few examples of strong male friendship, but we must begin with the famous Kṛṣṇa – Arjuna pain.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps, this is the only example of the one's under discussion that is not completely devoid of erotic content. The Ādi Parvan concludes with Kṛṣṇa asking Indra for the boon of eternal friendship with Arjuna.<sup>34</sup> (1.214.30) A lot of Kṛṣṇa's interventions in the epic are explained as motivated by his love for Arjuna.

In the Ādi Parvan, after wandering in the forest, Arjuna reached Prabhāsa, where he met Kṛṣṇa. They embraced<sup>35</sup> each other and asked about each others health. They amused themselves in Prabhāsa, as they pleased.<sup>36</sup> Then, they are sad to have gone to mount Raivataka for a stay and entertained themselves by watching actors and dancers, who were later dismissed before the two went to the celestial bed. For many nights, Arjuna stayed with Kṛṣṇa in the latter's lovely house that was filled with gems and pleasurable things.

After Arjuna's marriage with Subhadrā – which Kṛṣṇa had facilitated – in Indraprastha, everybody from Kṛṣṇa's side returned, but

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<sup>33</sup> They are described as good friends: *priyasakhayau*. The friendship has been discussed in detail in Vanita, R (2000)

<sup>34</sup> *Pṛīti prārthrena śaṣvatīm*.

<sup>35</sup> *Parīṣvajya*.

<sup>36</sup> *Yathakām*

Kṛṣṇa stayed on with Arjuna. They went to the Yamunā for a stroll and recounted many stories of ‘past feats and loves’,<sup>37</sup> and ‘enjoyed themselves’<sup>38</sup> (1.214.29). Kṛṣṇa met the Pāṇḍavas before the royal consecration in the Sabhā Parvan, and it is stated:

Joyously, he enjoyed himself with his dear friend Arjuna (2.14.33).<sup>39</sup>

In the Vana Parvan, commiserating with the Pāṇḍavas, Kṛṣṇa is said to have declared to Arjuna:

You are mine and I am yours (3.13.36)

Kṛṣṇa, at one point states that Arjuna is more important to him than wives, children or kinsmen (10.6.14). His love for Arjuna, surpasses all other loves (7.79.153). Again, he states that he has no desire for enjoying anything precious without Arjuna (7.182.424). After the war is over, they take a pleasure trip together (14.15.12). Before returning to Dwarkā, Kṛṣṇa passed the night sleeping with Arjuna (14.52.10).

Another example of male bonding is that of Vidura and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Unlike in the former example, here the friend’s status is not equal. In the Vana parvan, Dhṛtarāṣṭra had sent Vidura to the forest as the latter always praised the Pāṇḍavas, but he soon repented. He went to the door of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ratāni ca.

<sup>38</sup> Remāte pārthamadhavai

<sup>39</sup> The word *ramate* used for enjoyment is the same for both homosexual and heterosexual companionship. Vanita (2000:4).

assembly hall and bemused by the memories of Vidura, fainted. Later he told Sanjaya:

As I remember him, my heart is torn apart (3.7.120)

After having reconciled with Vidura, Dhṛtarāṣṭra is said to have found great happiness. When Vidura returned, after being requested to come back by Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the latter took him in his arms and kissed him on his head, and stated:

Day and night, I lay sleepless because of you (3.8.1).

It is said that even the inner chamber of the king were always open for Vidura, and the king was never 'unready' to see him (5.33.1).

A rather different kind of friendship is that of Droṇa and Drupada. It entails both a breach and a reunion. Droṇa states that Drupada was his friend, affectionate and eager to please him.<sup>40</sup> He, too, loved, Drupada's company. Droṇa recounting his friendship, told Arjuna:

He would come to me, saying and doing things that pleased me, and say to me things that made me like him more. (1.122.25-30).

Drupada, had promised Droṇa all his pleasures and comforts after anointment, but never kept it and insulted Droṇa. Later, Droṇa defeated Drupada with Arjuna's help. After Drupada's defeat, Droṇa declared to him:

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<sup>40</sup> *Sa me tatra sakhā cāsīduphārī priyaśca me*

Since you played with me in the hermitage, my love for you was fostered.<sup>41</sup> Once more I implore your friendship.<sup>42</sup> (1.128.7-10).

Droṇa shared a close bond with Arjuna too. Droṇa loves Arjuna, as he himself says, more than his own son (1.125.7).<sup>43</sup> When Arjuna promised to avenge Droṇa's humiliation at the hands of Drupada, Drona is said to have kissed him again and again on the head, embraced him fondly and shed tears of joy (1.122.44). Droṇa also promised Arjuna to make him the greatest archer (1.123.5).

Nowhere, in the epic do we get any hint of such a close bonding between males as being transgressive. Rather, the epic celebrates friendship and male bonding. It only adds to the masculine flavour of the epic, rather than detracting from it. This is not to say that conjugal and heterosexual relations are deprecated. However, it must be stated that no such accent is placed on female bonding and friendship.

### ***Summary***

Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought, and my focus in this chapter was on the 'other' that masculinity or the discourse on masculinity creates. The *kliba*, which is neither male nor female is shown as a completely unmanly creature, but it approximates more to the

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<sup>41</sup> *Sam̐vidhataḥ snehastvayā.*

<sup>42</sup> *Prarthayeyam̐ tvayā sakhyam̐ purreva nar̐rabha.*

<sup>43</sup> *Putratiprayatana.*

feminine. The cases of bisexual transformations show that it is the pre-transformed status that remains overbearing even in the new role. Male-bonding and friendship, doesn't in any way seems to be violative of masculinity. Thus, the 'other' that masculinity creates is as plural as masculinity itself.

## CONCLUSION

Discourses of masculinity remain remarkably understudied in gender works on ancient India, and this dissertation was an attempt to foreground them. I attempted to reveal the constructed nature of masculinity by focusing on representational categories.

A central outcome of this research has been that men per se are not masculine, but it is a series of attributes and qualities that makes them such. My reading of the *Mbh.* suggests that masculinity is represented as a form of power. Masculinity (*pauruṣeya*) is shown in the epic as arising out of male procreative/sexual seminal powers (*vīrya*). But the use of these terms is often quite fluid and interchangeable. Thus, male-sexuality and masculinity are for all practical purposes shown as synonymous, but this discourse is not monolithic and incorporates several genres within it.

An analysis of the brahmanic and ksatriyaic models of masculinity shows that the two notions are, to a great degree, fused. At the same time it also suggests that notions of masculinity, at least, at the theoretical level were tied up with conventional caste identities. Observing masculinity at the emotional plane, by an analysis of the representation of anger, shows that it may not even be gender-specific. Anger is represented as a masculine attribute, but it is Draupadī, more than any other character who is celebrated in this role. What women were denied was the desideratum of



anger, viz aggression. What made men masculine, were not always emotional attributes, but physical ones as well. Men sans weapons are, thus represented as less masculine.

Masculinity is also context-specific. Therefore, celibacy, which is shown as a masculine virtue wouldn't remain so in a changed context. Thus celibacy/procreation, anger / forbearance and asceticism/aggression despite being opposites are shown as both masculine and unmanly depending on the contexts. Since masculinity is represented as a form of power, it is shown as appropriating all that symbolizes power. One such appropriation is feminine fertility which is downplayed and imputed to the masculine realm alone. In this light, I have read the boons (often given by males) as fertile and curses (given by both men and women) as sterile. Moreover curses are represented as curbers, and boons as boosters of masculinity. The ability to give curses and boons required asceticism (read semen preservation). For women it was chastity and fidelity that were the prerequisites for an efficacious curse.

The attributes that make men masculine are often contradictory. The epic attempts to portray this 'all in one' ideal in the form of Arjuna. But, for the ideal to be the actual, these attributes had to be compromised. What emerges is a farrago character.

Feminity and masculinity are not represented in the epic as polar opposites. The absolute 'other' of masculinity is represented in the form of

*klibā*, which I call the ‘complete non-masculine entity’. But even the *klibā*’s identity is not rigorously pure and approximates more to the feminine. The epic’s way of accommodating sexual ambiguity, in the examples of bisexual transformations, lies in upholding the pretransformed status. Nonetheless, it admits the liminality of gender roles. Unlike some śāstric texts, and even the modern perception, the epic considers male homoerotic, and perhaps even homosexual behaviour as celebrating masculinity and not violating it.

As regards masculinity, this work argues for both indeterminacy and pluralism. Rather, I am arguing for an anti – essentialist notion of masculinity. In this sense, I adhere to the recent feminist explorations of gender, denying it any ontological status. I have already stated that a variety of meanings can be attached to the term masculinity.

They may range from aggression and prowess to continence and asceticism. Thus put, masculinity shows definitional elusiveness. I am arguing that there isn’t anything always specific about masculinity, and it cannot be seen as something monolithic.

The epic struggles to create a normative masculinity, but what emerges is a curious conglomerate. If maleness is about asceticism, it is also about performing all that asceticism interdicts. In the *Mbh.*, masculine norms are laid down, and also broken. Problems for masculinity are stated, but inconclusively and imprecisely resolved. Models of masculinity are

formed, and then demolished. Maleness struggles to define itself; it is ambivalent and graded. Different kinds of masculinities are invoked in different contexts. What is certain about masculinity is its rich pluralism. Because of its various shades, masculinity poses daunting definitional problems. Better put, there are contending masculinities.

A basic conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that perceptions of masculinity are reshaped by an idealized model. The idealized model shapes the perception and evaluation of reality, which appears flawed because of its lack of likeness to the idealized model.

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