

The Ambiguity of Gender in Mahabharata's Shikandi

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Abstract

This research article attempts to understand the creation of the myth of Shikandi and how the concept of the ideal Indian woman was indoctrinated and became a focal point of Indian culture. Any woman who tries to step outside this mould immediately becomes a target for the patriarchal society. In the Mahabharata, Bhishma who is lauded as the patriarch of Dharma is actually the cause of pain and destruction of Amba's life.

Amba however is not a voiceless woman. She seeks revenge on Bhishma but fails. It is in that instance that the figure of Shikandi is born. Shikandi is the first transgender in Indian epic and is an ambiguous entity, considered inferior to men. The societal inacceptance of such a figure is due to the indoctrination of the duality of gender, a social ambivalence.

Keywords: Stereotyping, myth, feminism, stigma, hijra, Amba

Myth are first and foremost, imaginative stories that carry a cluster of meaning relating to the way significant things originally were, or are, or ought to be. "Myth may be understood as a narrative which offers a number of religious and cultural meanings within a framework where exceptional and supernatural events may take place; in story form" (Paul Reid 34). The Indian epic Mahabharata tells the story of the Pandavas and deals with the concepts of dharma, government, family among others. Mahabharata is a male dominated epic where the female characters are either the society accepted 'Bharata Nari' or the gender defying stories of caution and vengeance.

The story of the mythical character Amba in Mahabharata can be identified as an insult by the male community towards women. Amba, who was in love with Salva, was abducted by Bhishma to Hastinapuri along with her two sisters Ambika and Ambalika. Later on she managed to escape from Bhishma and went back to Salva. But Salva rejected her because accepting her would defile his Kshatriya morality. Then Amba came back to Bhishma, but he too rejected her as he had taken a vow that prevented him from being with any women. Amba went around the world seeking a warrior who would avenge her humiliation.

The lotus – eyed Amba spent six bitter years in sorrow and lost hope. And her heart was seared with suffering and all the sweetness in her turned to gall and fierce hatred towards Bhishma as he was the cause of her shattered life. She sought in vain for a champion among the princes to fight and kill Bhishma. But even the foremost warriors were afraid of Bhishma and other kingdoms did not dare to fight against Bhishma.

A woman like Amba, disgraced by no fault of hers, will not get due respect from the society and Amba questions Bhishma who is a figure of the patriarchal society. Bhishma as patriarch of the epic being involved in such a gruesome affair should draw the attention to the role of dharma in the story. However that is often overlooked. Amba is a symbolic figure in the epic. She who was an ideal woman becomes a woman undesirable by societal standards.

The Upanishad's and Vedas have described the qualities, features of an ideal woman. Atharva Veda says that wives give us a discourse of knowledge:

The bride may please everyone at her husband's home through her knowledge and noble qualities. Oh bride! Step into the boat of prosperity and take your husband beyond the ocean of worldly troubles into realms of success. Oh groom! This bride will protect your entire family. The women are pure, sacred, and Yajniya (as respected as Yajna); they provide us with subjects, animals and food. (Trivedi)

In Rig Veda – A woman speaks after waking up in the morning, on her role:

My destiny is as glorious as the rising sun. I am the flag of my home and society. I am also their head. I can give impressive discourses. My sons conquer enemies. My daughter illuminates the whole world. I myself am winner of enemies. My husband has infinite glory. I have made those sacrifices which make a king successful. I have also been successful. I have destroyed my enemies. (Saraswati and Satyakam Vidyalankar)

There is another quote that shows the importance of a woman:

O men and women! A scholarly woman who has practiced or teaches one, two or four Vedas and four Upavedas, along with grammar, etymology etc and spreads knowledge to whole world and removes ignorance of people is source of happiness for entire world. A woman who studies and teaches all parts of Vedas brings progress to all human beings. (Saraswati and Satyakam Vidyalankar)

In Yajur Veda – in this mantra it is enforced that the wife of a ruler should give education of politics to the others. Likewise the king do justice for the people, the queen should also justify her role. The above mentioned quotes are some of the representations of the ideal women in different Vedic ages.

Amba could not be considered as an ideal woman according to the norms of the traditional Indian society. In epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata we can see women who love according to the rules and regulations. Indian tradition considers Sita as the ideal woman. There are similar characters in Mahabharata and Ramayana like Kunthi, Gandhari, Urmila etc. These women are symbols of the feminine generosity, love and sacrifice even in the face of personal angst and humiliation. They do not question the wrongs upon them and neither blame the men but accept it as their karma. Amba, however did not do this and wanted her vengeance on those who wrecked her life.

Sita, the ideal Indian woman, is the central female character of the Hindu epic Ramayana. She is the consort of the Hindu god Rama. She is esteemed to be the standard for wifely and

womanly virtues for all Hindu women. Sita is known for her dedication, self – sacrifice, courage and purity. In her youth she marries Rama, the prince of Ayodhya. Soon after her marriage, she is forced into exile with her husband and brother – in – law Lakshmana for twelve years. While in exile, she is abducted by Ravana, Rakshasa king of Lanka. She is imprisoned in the Ashoka Vatika of Lanka by Ravana. Sita proves her chastity by undergoing a fire trial. Thereafter Rama and Sita return to Ayodhya but Rama abandons the pregnant Sita when one of his subjects cast doubt over her chastity. In the refuge of sage Valmiki’s hermitage Sita give birth to twins Lava and Kusha. After her sons grow up and unite with their father, Sita returns to her mother, the Earth for release from a cruel world after refusing another test on her purity.

For goddess feminists patriarchy is understood to have produced myths that have served to legitimate the oppression of women and the degradation of the non – human world, and also systematically empowered men to the detriment of women. Goddess feminists, in turn, recognize that patriarchal myths must be challenged by the creation or reclamation of gynocentric alternatives. That is, “women must be empowered, female power legitimated and human relations with the rest of nature improved by a process of re – mythologization” (Paul Reid 34).

Amba is just the opposite of Sita. Sita never questioned the patriarchal society and suffered a lot without any complaints. But Amba questioned Bhishma who was considered to be ideal man, and a great warrior. Amba raised her voice twice, first, she was denied her right of making decision, to choose her life partner, later the sincerity of her love was questioned by Salva, this made her to voice and question the patriarchal society and made her an exceptional figure in female society in contradiction to Sita, the ideal women, the submissive, docile wife of Rama who never questioned the dominant and oppressive life which she had to lead. Amba was the opposite of all suffering Indian woman. She questioned the men and wished to avenge her humiliation. She was the first individual woman, the first voice of a vision who is not bound by the established stereotypes by a patriarchal order.

Feminism seeks to challenge traditional patriarchal notions and establish the perspectives and experiences of women who have been marginalized for ages. The reason for the sufferings and the structural inequality between men and women is the gender bias. It is not the result of biological necessity but a cultural construct. The society run by patriarchal ideologies keep women in subjugation. Women are always defined as the other and the men always establish norms, according to which the women are forced to live. Feminism reinforces the facts that sex and gender are entirely different from each other. Sex is biologically determined, while gender is constructed by society or culture. “Any given culture has a set of expectations and rewards, reinscribed through institutions, social practices and political structures, for how men and women should speak, act and internalize their identities” (Brodbeck and Black 13), but there is no place within this structure for a third gender.

In Indian society Shikandi or hijras were considered inferior, an ambiguous entity. But in special occasions like marriage and the birth of a child, the presence of hijras and their blessings are considered auspicious by the fact that the hijras are believed to be ascetics and thus having the power of celibacy. They are also believed to be endowed with the power of the Mother

Goddess whom they worship. But in real life circumstances they are either denied basic human rights or simply rejected by the society and forced to live a life of degradation on the fringes of society. This symbolic shift in meaning of the same figure, a subversive shift, it is difficult to consciously hold both positive and negative feelings about the same image simultaneously, this semantic ambiguity rises out of a societal ambivalence.

The identity of the transgender or the Shikandi is widely used as a means to mock male community who show a wavering attitude.

Despite being a residual category, containing aspects of both masculinity and femininity, gender ambiguity in the Mahabharata is often employed more in relation to notions of masculinity. This is illustrated when male characters taunt their enemies to show they are men, with the label 'eunuch' repeatedly employed to describe a man who refrains from battle. Female characters also reinforce this notion of masculinity by employing similar taunts. (20)

Women are a forgotten, unrecorded part of history. The patriarchal society which revered the reproductive quality of women pushed them away from the forefront and created a society of female silence, a society where they as individuals have no right or part but are mere dutiful wives, loving mothers, where only element of their importance is their femininity. Girl children brought up in the system of bound freedom and imagination are stereotyped and never let to go beyond the constraints put upon them.

When a child is born it is genderless, but, the society teaches it a gender and constructs an image of what the woman and man should be. For women, their choices are made by the men in the family or better knowing, older women – from what to dress, learn, who to marry, how many children to have etc. Women who reach out and attain their goals, who have the courage to stand up and raise their voice are usually talked off from the male viewpoint. Every woman is taken for granted all throughout her life. Whatever her role, she is just an accessory.

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