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## Concerning the Paradigm of Gender and Sexuality in the *Mahabharata*

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### **Abstract:**

From the Paleolithic era to modern times, the paradigms of gender have always been a significant deliberation in human history. The Mahabharata, an ancient Sanskrit epic, is still a substantial source for understanding the political, social, cultural, and gender interactions of eastern society. For this purpose, this paper concentrates on how the epic has been characterized by a string of binary oppositions that limit the social structure to the heteronormative ideal of having a clear understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman, as well as their shared social behaviors and fixed identities. To address these complex difficulties, more purposeful interventions are needed. Queerness, as an old notion of heterosexual society, is necessary to address the problems. This primary concern links with the interpretation of how the epic represents queerness and what it tells us about the discourse about gender and sexuality. In order to examine normative and non-normative gender relations, Butler's concepts of gender difficulty, gender performative acts, and gender constitution might be useful. The paper thematically distinguishes between the subjectivity and the objectification of the characters, who exhibit a variety of queer traits that are now seen as static, inflexible, consistent, and only seen in terms of binary categories. Finally, it observes that the contemporary concept of sexuality shows a paradigm shift in attitudes toward gender behavior.

**Keywords:** Binary, gender, heterosexual, Mahabharata, performative, queer, sexuality.

## Introduction

The *Vedas* include a record of human civilization in human history. They are the oldest literary monuments composed in Sanskrit, and are the foundational writings of Hindu philosophy. The *Mahabharata*, an epic, is about the dynastic and successional struggle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in Kurukshetra. It is a stunning yet intricate web of intertwined events, and characters are associated with the overarching anecdote of the conflict. It holds substantial significance for Hindus and it is crucial for its political, social, cultural, and gender relationships. The epic, a patriarchal world view, focuses on normative gender relation as well as non-normative rules. Benedict Anderson's model of imagined communities analyzes the concept of nationalism, and the characters in the epic are the members of a socio-cultural construct imagined by the political power of the then society, which has perceived the people as a part of a different group. Avishek Ray envisions, "... the "Indians" as "imagined community"; and was guided by a historicist impression that the nation's past is embodied in its literary repertoire" (2). The relationship between gender and sexuality, and politics and culture is clear since a substantial number of religious beliefs place an emphasis on moral, ethical, and even sexual behavior and etiquette.

Human conviction is a mechanism used to manage sexuality and compel people to engage in sexual conduct under social norms within predetermined bounds. The epic, a collection of plural anecdotes, is about betrayal, rage, and revenge and moves around the heroism and valor of the characters. Draupadi, a non-normative and unforgettable heroine, has high strength, spirit, and virtues, yet is frequently oppressed by Kauravas. Draupadi. Devdutt Pattanaik remarks, "[Karna] you have been with five husbands. That makes you a whore, public property, to be treated as your master's will" (146). The characters undergo various forms of sexual transformation and gender metamorphosis, challenging the strict heteronormativity binary and demonstrating the capacity to switch between various sexualities and genders. The depiction of multiple aspects of life represents miscellaneous relationships and the standing of women in society. Religion bears a significant system of ethical values connecting every human being to a broader association with the existing world. It offers a sense of tenacity of action, meaning, and cultural direction to human activity, leading to peace, justice, and dignity. However, such activities contribute to the violation of rational norms over and after a long period of time. The epic has expressed the individuality and

attractiveness of women in a deeper way, and Stephen Ellingson remarks that in many religions, “sexual unions between male and female deities extend a theme that constructs certain sexual relationships as normative and thus repetitive of the original moment of creation, and others as transgressive and potentially threatening to the cosmological order” (3). Similarly, motherhood in Sanskrit literature has always taken a consecrated place in a woman's life. Women's roles as mothers and wives seem patriarchal, ironically exalted, and coexist with their poor social standing, as Wendy Doniger and Brian Smith state in *The Laws of Manu*, “of the seed and the womb, the seed is superior” (10). Gender and socio-political systems transform the anatomy into complex social and sexual relations. It links to cultural relationships beyond the individual periphery, including families, groups, and societies.

We observe that while being tough and competent in their own right, the female characters always end up being limited to gender roles. Their capacity for selflessness or nurturing is frequently a sign of their strength. Although these traits are undoubtedly admirable, they do not seem to contribute much to these women's potential realizations in the absence of free autonomy. It employs the queer feminist theory—the concept of social and cultural phenomena—as a critical practice to read the depictions of sexualities in relation to heteronormativity, which accepts sex, gender, and sexuality as social constructs. Judith Butler remarks, “Gender is an identity tenuously made up in time and is instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). Her idea of gender performativity is not a fixed identity; as Lois Tyson observes, “For queer theory, our sexuality is constructed” (336). Therefore, the idea of queer sexuality, which challenges the inflexible binaries of male and female within the discourse of the epic, is the queer manifestation of *Tritiya Prakriti* (Nature).

Sexuality has connections with human relationships as natural or unnatural, and existing ideology, ritual, human activities, and power relations interpret it as licit and illicit. Butler outlines that gender and sexual binaries are socio-cultural constructs, not natural, that are perceived by human societies. The characters who deviate from the script rigidly uphold heteronormativity and violate these socially prescribed standards are labeled as other, non-normative, queer, or someone who is unfit for society. Thus, queer theory is a critical observation that accepts plurality in terms of gender and sexuality. In line with Butler's outline, Susan Mann states, “Gender and sexuality are composed of acts of striving to achieve a seemingly natural and universal idea that has never

actually existed in the pure form to which we aspire” (242). In order to link the idea of queer theory, it focuses on the issues of abducting the Kashi princesses Amba, Ambalika, and Ambika for marriage to Vichitravirya, the birth of the Pandava brothers, Draupadi’s marriage to five brothers, and the being of Brihannala and Shikhandi.

The epic relates to polyandry, premarital sex and motherhood, femininity, homoeroticism and homosexuality, transsexuality, gender ambiguity and fluidity, sexual transformation, and gender metamorphosis within the text. Simone de Beauvoir claims, "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (172), and Butler reinterprets this guideline of establishing the ideas from the phenomenological convention. In this sense, gender is not a fixed and a stable identity, and it is established through the practice of acts and creates the illusion of self. Butler claims, “This formation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted social temporality” (519-20). The cyclical nature of gender emphasizes how it is a product of socio-political reality and becomes part of culture. The stylized repetitions of deeds actually create the appearance of a real or natural-gender self. “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking of subversive repetition of that style” (Butler, 520). As a result, the *Mahabharata* has explored different gender categories, such as traditional and nontraditional ones, transsexuality, and demon-human relationships, within the narratives of the epic. Gender and sexuality in the epic have played a fundamental role in shaping society and creating new social values in order to run society, which establishes the meaning and stimulates cosmogenic myths and the human world.

### **Marriage in the *Mahabharata***

The epic *Mahabharata* confronts the heteronormativity that is currently present to recognize the prevailing social hegemonies and hierarchies of that time. The plural anecdotes of fluid sexualities, gender, and sexual and sexual transitions are in the epic. The scholars have examined queer sexualities, which do not have a connection between the religious discourse on queer sexualities and practices and modern queer discourse and practice. Pattanaik observes, “Within the *Mahabharata*, there are stories of men who become women and women who become

men, of men who create children without women and women who create children without men, and of creatures who are neither this nor that, but a bit of both” (12). In Anusasana Parva, the thirteenth book of the *epic*, Bhishma’s treatise to Yudhishtira on the position of women in a family reflects the ideas, “the lineage is destroyed if the daughters and daughter-in-laws are upset due to the ill treatment of their family, and daughters should be regarded the same as the son” (Vyasa, 5046). It reminds us that in ancient society, women’s position was ‘high’ and equal to that of men. Unlike this, the grand self-choice ceremonies organized for the marriage of Kashi and Panchala princess had undeclared restrictions, which is a tacit example of restricted freedom. As Bhishma captured Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika to marry Vichitravirya, the prince of Hastinapur, the first daughter of Kashi King Amba told Bhishma that she had promised to marry the king of Salva in the ceremony, but he rebuffed to accept her on certain terms, as Bhishma made her the controlled goods. Ramesh Menon writes, “Salva said coldly, “Go back to Bhishma. Perhaps he will break his oath for you. Beg him and see if he will marry you” (33). The vulnerable lady stood in front of Bhishma and uttered, “I cannot go back to my father’s house. I have nowhere to turn except to you”. He states, “My oath is not for myself. My dharma is far beyond my own selfishness and more important than your life” (34). During the self-choice ceremony of three princesses, Bhishma stated, “Sages have said that that wife is dearly to be prized who is taken away by force, after the slaughter of opponents, from amidst the concourse of princes and kings invited to a self-choice ceremony” (Sambhava Parva, 219). Religion as a tool of power shapes human fate, sexual identity, and gender selves. The assumption of reproductive ideology accepts sexuality and human behavior in terms of anatomy and gender relations.

The polarized social life in terms of power relations into male and female, or husband and wife, fertile and barren, represents human culture. Sharada Bhanu (1997) views that as Vichitravirya was in a manhood period, Bhishma marries him to Ambika and Ambalika. The ill-fated husband faces a crisis to secure the position of Hastinapur, and Satyawati spoke to Bhishma to execute her advice to beget sons, mothering Ambika and Ambalika. Krishna Dharma (2015) notes Bhishma denied in enagement, as he was committed for his celibacy, “Mother, please do not ask me to stray from the path of truth. I can never be as you suggest” (7). Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Vidura were born through Niyoga between the Sage Vyasa and Ambika, Ambalika, and Parishrami, respectively. Bhishma assumed marriage was the only significant matter to secure the

position of the Kuru dynasty. In addition, Gandhari was not in favor of marriage with Dhritarashtra, and after marriage, she blindfolded her eyes to respect the blindness of her husband. She fulfilled a woman's tradition to protect her husband's body and health, which was itself a sacrifice for his happiness. Kayanov interprets, "silent but a strong protest in opposition to the power games and the forced marriage" (532). The protagonist, Gandhari is forced to accept that Dhritarashtra reflects the patriarchal norms of her father. Nrisinghaprasad Bhaduri criticizes, "The youth league girl is never confirmed about her future husband's blindness and even she is not asked about her objection to this wedding" (169). Her stereotypical relationship with her husband stems from her father's attitude, which symbolizes her submissiveness to patriarchal power. "Gandhari was a faithful and the most devoted wife confronting the patriarchal mindset of the people" (Kalyanov 532). It suggests her devotion to regulate the system in unconditional and obedient.

Kunti's relationship with male authority before and after her marriage is complex. Her husband Pandu's incapability of being together with his wives Kunti and Madri indicates his disability in childbearing. Pattanaik claims, "Kunti consoled her husband. There was a time when women were free to go to any man they pleased. This alarmed the sage Shvetaketu who saw his father, Uddalaka, unfazed by his mother's association with other sages" (47). Kunti uses a boon, which she got from Sage Durvasa, to obtain sons, and he further writes, "[Shvetaketu introduced] if their husbands were unable to give their children, they could go to men chosen by their husbands" (47). It suggests that Kunti got a *mantra* (religious discourse) by making Sage Dhurvasa happy, and Kunti and Madri had five sons. Krishna Dharma writes, "Pandur was overwhelmed with happiness at seeing his sons' extraordinary strength, beauty, energy, and wisdom" (24), which necessarily addresses the socio-political problems of that society. Erik Zuercher stated, "The paramount role of filial piety, the subordination of the individual to the interests of the family, and the importance of marriage as a means to ensure the continuation of the paternal lineage are axiomatic..." (281), which constructs certain sexual relationships as normative gender roles.

Another prominent self-choice ceremony of Panchala daughter Draupadi, the self-choice, was granted not to Draupadi but to the king Drupad. The first archer, Karna, an illegitimate child of Kunti, was rejected by her by being charged with being of an inferior caste, as reared by Suta caste Vasusena, husband of Radha, who had proved his ability. The narrative of Draupadi's action of spurning Karna to accept Karna as husband marked the power of the king himself, not the

daughter. Bhim Nath Regmi states, “The triumph over Drupadi as their common wife in one way for Pandavas is a sign of great victory, and in the next, her saying to Karna is a component of cultural rejection that humiliates him publicly” (148). Disappointed Karna concluded to stand on the opposing side of Pandavas, and Arjuna possessed great archery skill to sting the bow, and she became his wife and married five brothers as family duty. Motswapong points out, “Draupadi... presented herself not only as an unsung heroine in the Hindu epic Mahabharata but also as a paragon of gender and resistance in the wake of the injustices meted out to her” (477). The narrative about Draupadi emphasizes the mistreatment of women, particularly within the family. In heterosexual society, the marriage bond between Draupadi and Arjuna is a heteronormative ideal view, with a clear understanding of what it means to be a man or a woman. The shared behavior as Draupadi becomes the part of five husbands is non-normative and goes beyond the fixed identities of society. To address these complex difficulties, more purposeful interventions are needed.

The abduction of Kashi princes and the non-denial right of accepting the husband-to-be to Draupadi demonstrate the patriarchal power and force to dominate a different sex and confirm making a submissive wife in the epic. Kate Millett, in her observation in *Sexual Politics*, reflects, “Patriarchal society relies heavily on ‘force’ in order to establish male dominance” (23). However, the epic ensures the sexual freedom of the women, leading to the conclusion that having polygamous husbands or sexual partners outside marriage and within marriage is a family duty. The *Mahabharata* remarks, “Any connection between a man and a woman without lust or during the menstrual season is not wrong or forbidden” (Adivansavatarana Parva, 130). In the *Mahabharata*, both Satyawati and Kunti fulfilled the desires of Sage Parasara and the Sun, respectively, before marriage, and even after that, their virginity was an integral part of the body—as a part of ‘male-ego’ to satisfy the manhood, and power is flexible in the epic. Beauvoir views, “[the] myth of virginity as reflecting a male’s hesitation between the fear of being in the power of uncontrollable forces and to wish to win them over. The very powers that are frightening in wild beasts or in unconquered elements became qualities valuable to the owner able to domesticate them” (184–186). The prominent example of using men’s force and power to control females to fulfill sexual desire is reflected in the relationship between Pandu, Kunti, and Madri. To justify it, Krishna Dharma (2015) states, “Kunti recited to her husband an ancient history... a powerful king



who had died without issue. His lamenting wife had embraced his dead body, and by the arrangement of the gods, she conceived three qualified sons. ...asked Pandu to emulate that king” (20). He, then, embraced Brahmanacharya; he did not possess that power, as Kunti stated, and Kunti, knowing the incantation *mantra*, had perceived a power from the sage and bore him heirs from different men. Pandu was delighted by it and said to his wife, “...you should call the great Dharma, god of justice. He will never pollute us with sin, and his son will undoubtedly be qualified in every way” (Krishna Dharma, 20). She agreed with Pandu on his determination to have polygamous sexual relations and have babies. She mothered Yudhisthira, Bhima, and Arjuna and denied having many children. Her rejection of it says, “The woman having intercourse with four different men is called a *Swairini* (heanton), while she having intercourse with five becomes a harlot” (Sambhava Parva 259). Pandu, Kunti, and Madri begot two sons, Nakula and Sahadeva. Here, it seems sarcastic, as Draupadi married five sons of Kunti and Madri and could not be a harlot.

### **Objectification of Female Characters**

This paper focuses on normative relationships in the epic that are recognized by the political power relations of the Kuru dynasty. The societal norms for male and female characters are reinterpreted by the mother, father, and sages. The central character Draupadi and her husbands, the polyandrous marriage is acknowledged by Kunti. Pattanaik states, “Without turning around, Kunti said, ‘Whatever it is, share it equally with your brothers’” (91). The Karna-Kunti relationship as son and mother has been possible due to the boon of the sage Durvasa. Gandhari’s self-sacrifice for patriarchal power is a normative gender relationship. The son-mother-husband associations of the Kunti-Madri male body are signified in the relationships between women and identified males. The Sage Shvetaketu defines it and legitimizes how characters are formed to represent societal roles. Subversion is against a man-centric worldview. The exposed incidents serve as an example of how such a discussion has evolved and been put into practice. It raises the prospect that male authority institutions may function in a woman's body. Spivak observes, “The *Mahabharata* contains cases of various kinds of kinship structure... Draupadi, who provides the only example of polyandry... She is married to the five sons of the impotent Pandu... exceptional in the sense of odd, unpaired, uncoupled... Her husbands... legitimately pluralized” (387). In the epic, she legitimized pluralization of family structure as a wife of five husbands; Spivak remarks,

“in singularity (as a possible mother or harlot) is used to demonstrate male glory” (387). Her elder husband lost her in a game of dice as an object, which is non-normative gender practice. Bhishma’s decision to abduct Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika as objects and marry them to Vichitravirya was a non-normative practice. The self-choice ceremony was seized, and Hastinapura’s monarch, Vichitravirya, was crowned and reigned for a short time. He was childless, and Satyawati failed to convince Bhishma to wed Vichitravirya's widows, so she finally contacted her premarital son, Vyasa. Bhishma coordinated Dhritarashtra's nuptial to Gandhari; he wed Vidura to the daughter of Devaka and brought Madri to Pandu.

The dice game was objectified in the royal hall to legitimize Kauravas’ power over Pandavas. In Merleau-Ponty's understanding, the female body, like the body of Draupadi, is a part of a sexual being, and Butler claims, “...with such accounts of bodily experience and claims that the body... comes to bear cultural meanings” (520). Draupadi, the common wife of five brothers, comprises her polyandrous marriage. Pattanaik states that in the assembly, the Kauravas attempted to strip her and perceived her as a prostitute, and Karna blames her as “you a whore” (146). Her silence in radical polyandrous relationships is fascinating, and she plays a stereotypical role in shaping society. Her lascivious look challenges the vulgarity of Duryodhana and rages if Yudhishthira has lost him first and how he could stake in the dice game. To her, it was an illegal matter, and beautifying her as an object is a problem of gender freedom. Her subjective status seems to be denied and offers grounds for a predicament. Draupadi is the dependent wife of Pandavas as an object. The clothed or unclothed people in the assembly remind us how a woman is playing the traditional role in patriarchal society.

The non-normative gender relations of the transgender prince of Panchala, Shikhandi, and the pregnant king, Yuvanashwa, oscillated between gendered identities and contested the dominant heteronormative sexual framework, which challenged the symbolic gender binary and outlined a range of potential outcomes. It evaluates the influence and result of the gender queer community's rejection of the prescriptive order of subjectivities. It emphasizes the pain and struggle of marginalized people by drawing on queer and deconstructive ideology—a significant conversation in the queer space. Butler expresses, “gender was a parody, a choice, or a role, or rather a construction; drag suggested a conflict between sex and performance” (21). It blurred the boundaries between sex and gender in several stories, myths, and legends found in Sanskrit

literature. The *Mahabharata*, as a remark of Sanskrit society, reflects the tradition of sex and the binary approach. One such story, Arjuna's transformation into Brihannala, is a eunuch. Arjuna is 'cursed' to spend his final thirteenth year as a transgender person, and the Pandavas were banished to spend their thirteen years in the jungle away from their realm, causing Arjuna to change into Brihannala, a third-sex identity that symbolizes his transformation from a male physical being to an eunuch body. The marriage between Hidimba-Bhima is a disregarded relationships.

The Pandavas were seeking sanctuary with King Virata of Matsya, and the princess Uttara enjoyed dance and music from Brihannala, a trainer of classical culture. Brihannala lived in the palace throughout the final year, along with the princess and other females. Sara Ahmed discusses "compulsory heterosexuality" (23) and how it manifests in the dominant discourse, whereby human bodies, their gender, and their sexuality are forced to conform to a heteronormative framework and express queer desires by deviating from straight lines in particular. The illusion of real into transformed identity highlights new natural sex to establish pre-discursive knowledge of new reality. Krishna Dharma states that Brihinnala utters, "I sing, dance, and play musical instruments. Am skilled in all these arts...Please do not ask me how I acquired this form, for that would only add to my pain. Know me to Brihinnala, a son or daughter without parents" (361). As the queer feminist world views, sexuality, gender, and sex are social constructs rather than biological traits. Butler's ideas of gender performativity state that gender is not a fixed identity; rather, it is flexible. It is the outcome of repeated acting that creates the appearance of a static, genuine gender. Her observation is "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time and is instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (519). The epic embodies queerness, and it reveals multiple treatises about gender and sexuality.

Queer theory defines heteronormativity as an oppressive system. It relies on feminist critiques of binary gender concepts like male/female and masculine/feminine. It explores how gendered and sexual identities and behaviors are socially created, and it theorizes about how sexual behaviors and gender identities fall into categories of deviance and normal conduct according to prevailing social norms. The sexual norms at the focus are opposed to the conventional and essentialist ideas of gender, sex, and gendered identity. Butler draws attention to the performative aspects of gender and sexuality that have become normalized via recurrent adherence to the privilege of heteronormativity as norms, signals, and customs. She contends that sexual and gender

boundaries are not innate traits of people but a sociocultural construct created and upheld by human cultures. Susan Archer Mann states in the same way, “gender and sexuality are composed of acts of striving to achieve a seemingly natural and universal idea that has never actually existed in the pure form to which we aspire” (242). By means of queer theory as a critical lens, it is significant to break down the rigidity that exists in the form of male/female binaries and realize the existing diversity in terms of gender and sexuality. The wider social discourse and social norms are identified and analyzed by queer theory as an oppressive system that normalizes and supports heterosexism in the discourse on gender and sexuality. It recognizes that identities are constructed in society through the deployment of the socio-political power of sexual discourse.

## Conclusion

From the Paleolithic era to modern times, the notion of gender has been a significant part of academic debate. The *Mahabharata* is still a considerable source for linking with political, social, cultural, and gender interactions and incorporating plural ideas to understand modern and post-modern realities. The representation of fluid sexuality and the existence of gender-variant deities in some ways praise, legitimize, and normalize the debate on queerness and sexualities being performed in the epic. In it, heterosexuality was not the norm and has long embraced fluid ideas of sexuality and gender roles. The characters exhibit the aforementioned examples of queerness, demonstrating how gender and sexuality are not static, inflexible, consistent, or regarded primarily in terms of binary categories, as they are today considered to be. Contrary to Hindu discourse, especially texts and myths represent gender and sexuality, which appear to be fixed and viewed only within the binary of male and female. Since the beginning of time, the epic has enlightened the culture with its countless identity-relevant themes. The *Mahabharata* has survived for so long because of its ability to be modified, adopted, and refashioned, which provides countless opportunities to start lengthy discussions. As such, contemporary notions of sexuality and heteronormativity demonstrate a paradigm shift in attitudes toward gender and sexual behavior. The practice of alternative types of sexuality is frowned upon, ostracized, and suppressed because heterosexuality has become the norm. The acceptance of non-normative sexual behaviors within the mainstream socio-cultural discourse and the myriad queer themes prevalent in Hinduism are ignored. Any person who deviates from the script that rigidly upholds heteronormativity and violates these socially prescribed standards is quickly labeled as other, non-normative, queer, or

someone who is unfit for society. Additionally, everything that is oppressively normal is subject to criticism in queer theory. In order to challenge normalized notions of sex, gender, and sexuality and to challenge oppressive regimes of normality, it is helpful to approach theory from a queer viewpoint. Such criticisms of 'normativity' are essential for opposing the ingrained heteronormativity in the epic and establishing the room for alternative manifestations in sexuality-related narratives.

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