

From Amba to Shikhandi: The Asymmetries of Gendered Justice in the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract

This paper examines the interlinked stories of Amba and the transformed Shikhandi as a structural case study in how the *Mahabharata* distributes access to justice on the axis of gender. Focusing on Amba's rebirth as Shikhandi as a moment of vindication, the paper argues that, far from being the story of a wronged woman's recompense, it is the story of a wronged woman's grievance being allowed to proceed — to the degree it proceeds at all — only by a man's involvement. Through a close reading of Amba's appeals, the self-serving construction of Bhishma's vows, the conditional execution of Shikhandi's agency, and the ultimate transfer of killing blow to Arjuna, the paper traces this theme to reveal that the *Mahabharata*'s justice for women is always achieved through but never by a female body. The paper's comparative reading of Draupadi's disrobing and its delayed, male-executed redress suggests that this is not an idiosyncrasy of Bhishma's vow, but a general phenomenon of the epic's moral economy. The paper concludes by situating this reading alongside existing scholarship on gender and myth and contrasting it with the modern retelling tradition which has sought to rectify precisely this gendered imbalance.

Keywords: Mahabharata; Amba; Shikhandi; gendered justice; Bhishma; Draupadi; epic literature; gender and agency; Sanskrit epic studies; feminist literary criticism

1. Introduction

The *Mahabharata* has often been read as a meditation on the instability of *dharma* — a moral order that promises coherence and rarely delivers it, leaving the text's characters and its readers to struggle toward difficult conclusions. Rarely has the epic been read, however, for what its treatment of gender says about this instability and its distribution: not that *dharma* is ambiguous, but that its ambiguities are not distributed equally, along the axis of gender. Nowhere is this greater than in the stories of Amba and the transformed Shikhandi. Amba, princess of Kashi, is abducted, rejected, and unplaceable by a series of men, each of whom the epic itself identifies as having acted within the boundaries of *dharma*. She appeals fruitlessly to king after king, sage after sage, until, reborn as Shikhandi and possessing a male body, she finally arrives at the battlefield to take her vengeance. Even this is not sufficient, for the man who slays Bhishma, the cause of her grievance, is Arjuna, not Shikhandi.

The paper argues that this arc is not an isolated incident of the epic's larger moral machinery but a demonstration of how justice works, gendered and otherwise, in the *Mahabharata*: that while women's grievances are recognized as legitimate, the avenues through which they might be realized are only open to men. The paper proceeds in five movements. First, it traces the arc of Amba's grievance to show how a series of acts, each legitimate under the epic's moral code, combine to produce an injustice with no

institutional remedy. Second, it examines Bhishma's vows as a case study in how the male honour code is constructed to protect men, from women's retribution while leaving women vulnerable to men's advances. Third, it returns to Shikhandi's transformation to argue that narrative agency is granted to Amba only by virtue of her being something other than a woman. Fourth, it analyses the killing of Bhishma to show that, even this hard-won opportunity for retribution is not sufficient — Shikhandi's presence enables, but only Arjuna's action achieves justice. Finally, the paper situates this analysis alongside the other paradigmatic gendered injury in the *Mahabharata*, the episode of Draupadi's disrobing, to argue that the pattern holds true across the epic's moral economy. The paper's conclusion engages existing scholarship on gender in the *Mahabharata* while identifying the ways in which the reading it proposes complicates and extends that scholarship.

Research Gap and Methodological Approach

Scholarship on gender in the *Mahabharata* tends to cluster around two conversations that rarely intersect. The first is a body of work, discussed below, that reads Shikhandi primarily through the lens of gender and sexuality studies — examining his transformation and ambiguous gender presentation as an expression of third-gender categorization or proto-queer narrative intervention in ancient narrative. This literature is interested in what Shikhandi is, categorically, and what his transformation might signify about the epic's overall treatment of gender and sexuality issues. It is less interested in what Shikhandi's transformation means for the arc of justice that led to it — or, more particularly, why that arc needed to have him reborn as a man instead of a woman. The second conversation centres on Draupadi, particularly the episode of her disrobing, as a paradigmatic instance of gendered injustice in the *Mahabharata*, examining her speech, her rhetorical agency, and the failure of the elders' assembly to respond with due censure. The two conversations are rarely brought together in a single argument because their subjects appear, on the surface of the text, to have little in common: one involves transformation across multiple lifetimes, the other a single episode that does not require one at all. This paper fills the gap between them by reading Amba-Shikhandi and Draupadi's disrobing as two instances of a single phenomenon: the ways in which gendered justice is asymmetrical in its distribution. In examining the two episodes through the same lens, the paper identifies patterns that neither reveals entirely on its own, and suggests that those who read the two conversations separately have underestimated the degree to which a common mechanism appears in both.

Methodologically, this paper proceeds through close textual analysis rather than quantitative or empirical methods, as appropriate to a literary-critical argument of this sort. The paper employs comparative close reading to analyse the two episodes in question — the transformation sequence involving Amba-Shikhandi, and Draupadi's disrobing — reassembling each from the epic in order to identify who initiates each injury, who is entitled to appeal for redress, through what channel that appeal proceeds, and whose hands execute retribution, if any. This focus on the mechanism of redress — not on its resolution — is what allows the paper to examine these two episodes as instances of a single rule rather than unrelated stories. Secondary theoretical framing is drawn from existing scholarship on gender and feminism in the *Mahabharata* (discussed in a later section) in order to place the paper's argument within and distinguish it from existing conversation, but the paper's core claims are drawn from the textual evidence of the two episodes rather than theoretical importation from outside sources. The analysis necessarily focuses on these two episodes rather than attempting to engage the epic's gendered moral

economy as a whole, though the paper's conclusion gestures toward similar patterns in other episodes of the text.

Amba and the Failure of Direct Redress

The injustice done to Amba proceeds in instalments, and it is worth examining each closely, since the force of the paper's first argument derives from the realization that, considered within the text's own logic, not one character commits an action that might be called wrong. Bhishma comes to the *svayamvara* of the princesses of Kashi and, along with the bride Ambika and her sister Ambalika, abducts Amba for the bridegroom Vichitravirya, his half-brother. The abduction takes the form of *rakshasa vivaha*, marriage by capture — an accepted, if aggressive, variation of marital custom among *kshatriyas*, and one the text identifies as within Bhishma's right as a warrior choosing brides for his family. Amba later informs Bhishma that her heart belongs to King Salva of Saubha, and that she wished to be released to wed him; Bhishma honours her request. This too, is no wrong, only an act of generosity on Bhishma's part: he loses no status, no possessions, no claim by releasing a woman he never intended to wed in the first place.

The injustice begins when Amba, having regained her agency in theory, finds that it has no destination. Salva refuses to wed her, on the grounds that she had already been "won" and captured in a public contest, regardless of Amba's own wishes or the fact that she had been released in the first place. Whether she is eligible to marry again, in his eyes, is dictated by circumstance rather than intent, and her honour is determined by a condition she has not herself created. She then attempts to return to the Kuru household, but the royal court refuses to accept her back, having already given her away in marriage. Amba finds herself bereft of all claims: not a widow, not a maiden, not a bride, but none of these categories apply to her either. She is not a woman of any particular social category at all.

The interest of this episode lies in the fact that none of its characters appears, within the narrative logic, truly villainous. Bhishma's abduction is a recognized form of marriage; his release of Amba represents only a gesture of generosity. Salva's refusal is harsh, but it is a reasonable application of honour customs, according to which a woman cannot marry more than once regardless of her wishes to the contrary. The Kuru court's refusal to take her back is no less reasonable within the logic of the social order. Each actor follows the rules of the system; the rules of the system have produced an outcome no one intended and which none of them know how to remedy. This appears to be the paper's first claim: that *dharma*, precisely as practiced in the text, produces an injustice which it itself makes impossible to remedy. Amba's appeals bear this out, for they are all denied, routed through human intermediaries whose actions may be just but certainly not sufficient to the task of correcting an injustice. Only when Amba turns from human intercessors to austerities directed to Shiva does her petition find any traction — which is to say, she must have recourse to a realm beyond the human social order before her grievance receives any hearing at all.

Bhishma's Vow: *Dharma* as a Self-Regarding Code

Amba's story is inseparable from the specific instrument that both created her grievance and allowed its author to escape its consequences: Bhishma's vow. The vow of lifelong celibacy and renunciation of the throne — the Bhishma *pratijna* — is one of the most celebrated acts of self-sacrifice in the epic, held up in the tradition as an exemplum of a son's *dharma* toward his father's desires. It is worth re-reading this vow, however, not as an exemplum of virtue but as a manoeuvre of strategic retreat. By swearing off marriage, Bhishma withdraws from all future claims that a wife or father might have against him, past

obligations or otherwise; by renouncing the throne, he ensures that no claim he has against his brothers or children can be satisfied by an exchange of goods or status. The vow that tradition remembers as an act of heroism is, from the perspective of anyone with a future claim against Bhishma, a defensive retreat.

A second vow, equally significant, operates as a kind of reinforcement. Bhishma further vows never to raise his arms against a woman, or against one who was born a woman, a commitment generally read as an instance of *kshatriya* honour extended to those the code deems worthy of its protection. Examine the text's distribution of protection under this vow, however, and it becomes clear that the vow does not protect women against men; it only protects men against women. By swearing never to injure a woman, or a man who was born a woman, Bhishma ensures that no woman will be able to injure him in return — a far more practical application of justice than the inverse. This observation is worth making explicitly: the code regulates, in excruciating detail, what may not be done to the *kshatriya* hero; what may be done to other persons by the hero it leaves, almost entirely, unregulated, so long as he keeps within the bounds of established custom. *Dharma*, in this reading, is far less a universal ethical constraint than it is a set of self-serving rules that a powerful man may observe completely while producing devastating consequences for those without such moral or strategic resources.

This is the structural root of the difficulty that ultimately confronts Amba in her appeals. If she is to obtain justice against Bhishma, she must do so through no channel that his vows have anticipated or provided — for he cannot be held to a wife's claim, a son's claim, or a combatant's claim, having already renounced all of these at once. Her retribution, if it is to come at all, must proceed around Bhishma's vows rather than through them.

Shikhandi: Transformation as the Price of Agency

Amba's response to her impasse is absolute: she undergoes austerities of increasing rigor, winning from Shiva the promise that in her next incarnation she will be the agent of Bhishma's death, and that she will die in the process. She is reborn as Shikhandini, daughter of King Drupada. The variants of this episode are numerous, and the divergence is worth examining rather than eliding. In several versions, an oracle or divine assurance informs Drupada to raise the child as a son from birth, concealing her sex; as she approaches marriage, a crisis erupts over the child's gender, and she is exchanged for male sex with a yaksha, becoming physically male before her nuptials are consummated. In other versions, the ambiguity is not resolved but merely deferred: Shikhandi's gender continues to be indeterminate throughout her life, and Bhishma's refusal to fight her is based not on a technicality that has since been corrected but on the memory of her birth as a woman, male sex or no.

The divergence is worth articulating, since it affects the reading of the episode's politics in a significant way. In one interpretation, the *yaksha* exchange serves to naturalize the story's gender troubles: Shikhandi ends up definitively, physically male, and the episode's ambiguity is a side note on the way to a stable masculine identity that allows battlefield agency. In the other interpretation, the gender ambiguity is never resolved — Bhishma's refusal to fight her depends specifically on viewing her as still, in some operative sense, a woman, which means that the text itself has recourse to a gender category that is simultaneously disqualifying and effective. Either reading supports the paper's central claim, but via different mechanisms: in the first, Amba's justice requires that she cease to be a woman in any way that matters; in the second, that she retain an ambiguous, liminal gender classification in order for her femaleness to continue to function as a weapon against a man who has vowed not to fight women.

The liminality of this gender category has attracted significant critical commentary, and a thorough discussion of the paper's arguments would engage this conversation directly. Scholars working in gender and sexuality studies — specifically, those examining South Asian religious literature — have read Shikhandi alongside the entire spectrum of Sanskrit epics' gender terminology, including categories such as *napumsaka*, *kliba*, and the classification of a *tritiya-prakriti*, or third nature, that appears in some textual and dharmashastric traditions. It is unnecessary, for the purposes of this paper, to weigh whether Shikhandi represents an early instance of trans or intersex representation in literature or whether such a reading imports modern concepts onto an ancient text dealing with different issues. What is necessary for the purposes of this paper is more specific and, arguably, less contestable: that whichever interpretation one adopts, Amba does not obtain agency as Amba, but only as Shikhandi — that is, as someone whose gender has been renegotiated at the level of identity, and that no such renegotiation is asked of Bhishma, of Salva, or of any other male actor in the story.

The Mechanics of Vengeance: Instrument and Agent

The consequence of this renegotiation plays out in and around the battlefield of Kurukshetra, and is on the surface Amba's long-deferred victory, and on closer inspection, denies her this very thing - the ability to kill. Bound by his vow to not fight any one born a woman, Bhishma, on realizing Shikhandi, arrayed against him in his chariot, lowers his weapons and refuses to fight. This is the situation the entire preceding narrative has constructed - the vow that once protected Bhishma from any claim Amba might have made on him, has, by virtue of the very same properties, negated Bhishma's ability to defend himself against Shikhandi. And yet, it is not Shikhandi who capitalizes on the situation. Behind Shikhandi's chariot, Arjuna takes advantage of Bhishma's refusal to fight with a volley of arrows that pin Bhishma to a bed of shafts, where he will linger, until he can take his own life.

This division of labour is worth specifying, because it is easy, in retelling this episode, to conflate this action into the triumphant sentence that opens retellings of "Shikhandi caused Bhishma's fall", and effaces the mechanism this paper wishes to focus on. Shikhandi's function is to negate, not enact, and her presence in this passage disables Bhishma's ability to protect himself or to retaliate, it does not actually inflict the injury that kills Bhishma. That injury is dealt by Arjuna, a warrior who has no doubts about his masculinity and who has no cause for personal vengeance against Bhishma, making his instrumentality an unfit medium for poetic justice - he kills Bhishma, not because Bhishma wronged him, but because it serves the Pandava cause in war. Amba's grievance, which has informed the entire episode (from the *svayamvara* abduction onwards), is fulfilled by another's hand, for another's reason, and as part of another's war.

It is worth pausing to consider why the text requires this division at all - why, given that Shikhandi has, up to this point, a fully martial identity and a divinely sanctioned mission, she could not simply have killed Bhishma. One might argue that the logic of the epic itself necessitates this division: Bhishma's paralysis in the sight of Shikhandi is a refusal to fight, rather than a defeat, and a warrior who has put down his weapons cannot be said to have been defeated in a duel by a warrior who has refused to fight - for there has to be an active combatant on the other end, for a battlefield death to be registered as such. The text provides Arjuna for this purpose. One might argue that this technical necessity is precisely the point - the narrative machinery of the epic simply does not have a slot for "wronged woman kills the man who wronged her" as an executable action within the story world, no matter how much transformation the

wronged woman may have undergone within the story to be eligible to enact the action. The closest the text can get is with this two-step structure, wherein a woman disables, and a man executes.

Comparative Asymmetry: Draupadi and the Limits of Redress

If the Amba-Shikhandi narrative were an isolated incident, this might be taken as the result of an unusual plot requirement - Bhishma's particular vow required a particular solution, and the mechanics described above are a consequence of the requirement. The epic's other great episode of gendered injury, Draupadi's disrobing, has a comparable structure despite wildly different circumstances, and without the element of gender transformation or physical embodiment change at all. When Duhshasana attempts to disrobe Draupadi in the dicing hall of the Kauravas, after she has been staked and lost, her own attempts at redress - appeals to the elders, to her husbands, to the principle of *dharma* as a governing philosophy the court has failed to uphold - go unheeded or are paralyzed, the elders sitting in quiet contemplation, her husbands bound by the very rules of the game they have lost, and only divine intervention (the miraculous length of Draupadi's sari) preventing the assault from being completed. Draupadi's own agency in this moment is entirely verbal - to protest, to query, to invoke a vow, famously, that she will leave her hair unbound until it can be washed in Duhshasana's blood.

The fulfilment of this vow, notably, does not come from Draupadi's hand. It is Bhima who kills Duhshasana, years later, on the battlefield, and tears open his ribs (in the more visceral versions of this action) and completes Draupadi's vow by bringing the blood to her hair. As with Shikhandi and Bhishma, the woman's redress - the fulfilment of her wounded sense of justice - is authorized by the language and pain of the woman, but actualized by a man's hand, at a remove from the injury and folded the rationale of a war not of her making. Draupadi does not have to undergo any change of gender or embodiment - unlike Amba, she remains legible as a woman throughout this episode - and yet the result is the same: she can authorize, invoke, and wait, but not execute this redress herself.

Placing these two episodes in conversation with one another allows this paper to make its central claim with more precision than it perhaps would in isolation. It is not that Amba's particular problem was solved by a change of gender while Draupadi's different problem did not have to be - it is that the epic, across these different injuries (solved through years of transformation and rebirth, and through immediate divine rescue followed by years of battlefield reckoning), has the same underlying rule. Female-authored violence against a male aggressor is narratively illegible in this text, regardless of the mechanism of injury or the resources available to the woman who has been wronged. Only female-sponsored, male-executed, violence is allowed to complete the transaction. Amba's case simply raises this rule more prominently to view, because the means by which it was required involved an additional (and unresolved) renegotiation of Amba's own gender to enable the sponsorship; Draupadi's case is evidence that this rule applies even when no such negotiation is needed.

Theoretical Framing

This reading fits into a broader conversation about gender, violence, and myth in the Sanskrit epic tradition, and contextualizing it within this conversation illuminates what this paper contributes. Wendy Doniger's extensive work on gender, sexuality, and mutability of identity in Hindu mythological narrative is one such frame, particularly where she examines the way myths employ bodily transformation to overcome tensions which the surrounding social order cannot accommodate - a dynamic clearly at play in

Shikhandi's *yaksha* episode. Alf Hiltebeitel's work on Draupadi and the ritual and symbolic architecture of the *Mahabharata* more generally is another such frame, particularly in examining the ways the epic weaves its female characters into its sacrificial and cosmological logic in ways that transcend their individual narrative purpose. Taken together, these works support the argument this paper advances: that the epic's treatment of Amba and Draupadi reflects a coherent (if troubling) logic about where female agency is allowed to terminate in direct action, and where it must be subsumed by a male agent's action.

It is worth examining, briefly, how this feature of the text has been responded to and engaged by later reimaginings of this particular epic. The substantial modern tradition of retellings which centre Amba's and Draupadi's interiority (Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, narrated in Draupadi's own voice, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, which engages in a similar centring) can be read as a direct response to the absence this paper has outlined. The impulse which motivates these retellings, to give Amba and Draupadi the interior voice and, in some cases, the more direct agency which the source text denies them, is in itself evidence that later readers have read this asymmetry as a gap worth addressing. A text does not inspire a persistent tradition of corrective retelling, if there is nothing in it worth correcting.

Conclusion

The story which runs from Amba to Shikhandi is often summarized, retold, and reimagined as a story about a wronged woman who gets her justice in the end - a satisfying if delayed resolution to a clear case of wrong. This paper has argued that this summary ignores exactly what makes this episode of particular interest. What the epic actually depicts is not justice delayed but justice rerouted: a series of requirements, increasingly demanding, which a woman's claim to redress must fulfil before it can be heard, much less enacted. Amba must step outside of the regular channels of human justice and appeal to a god directly. She must die and be reborn. She must undergo a renegotiation of her own gender that no male actor in this story is ever required to undertake. And even then, having fulfilled all of these requirements, she does not enact the final performance herself, a man does so for her, for his own reasons. Draupadi's parallel claim demonstrates that this is not a feature particular to Bhishma's vow but a more general pattern about the limitations of female agency in the epic's system of violence. Justice, in this reading, is gendered not only in its outcomes (who is allowed to suffer, who is allowed to be vindicated) but in its execution - who is allowed to hold the instrument of vengeance, and who must be content to wait while someone else does so in their name and for their benefit. Recognizing this pattern in the *Mahabharata* is important work, not only because of the text itself, but because the same set of assumptions (a woman's claim rendered legitimate in principle but actionable only through a man or a masculinized agent) resurface in epic and mythological traditions far beyond this one, and identifying it clearly in its most prominent form is a necessary first step to examining it elsewhere.

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