

Gender Performance and the Construction of Masculinity in Anuja Chandramouli's *Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince*

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Abstract

This article examines gender representation and the construction of masculine identity in Anuja Chandramouli's *Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince*. Drawing from the Mahabharata and retold through a modern lens, Chandramouli's narrative reimagines Arjuna not only as a warrior-hero but also as a complex figure negotiating expectations of duty, emotional vulnerability, and gendered performance. Through the lens of gender theory—particularly Judith Butler's concept of performativity and Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity—this paper explores how Arjuna's identity is shaped by sociocultural codes and epic conventions. It argues that the novel offers a nuanced depiction of masculinity as performative, fractured, and subject to continual negotiation within the mythological and moral frameworks of Hindu tradition.

Keywords: Masculine identity, emotional vulnerability, hegemonic masculinity

Introduction

The Mahabharata is a foundational epic in Indian mythology, and Arjuna stands as one of its most iconic heroes. Traditionally revered as the epitome of martial valor and righteousness, Arjuna has often been portrayed in hypermasculine terms. However, Anuja Chandramouli's *Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince* complicates this depiction by giving the hero emotional depth, moral ambiguity, and inner conflict. This article explores the ways in which the novel reconfigures masculine identity through Arjuna's experiences—as a son, husband, student, exile, and warrior.

By focusing on Arjuna's emotional world, moral dilemmas, and moments of vulnerability, Chandramouli's retelling challenges fixed ideas of masculinity in epic literature. Through the lens of gender performance and social construction, this study analyzes how the novel situates Arjuna within overlapping roles that both conform to and challenge hegemonic ideals of manhood.

Background

In Hindu mythology, masculinity is often equated with physical strength, valor, and moral clarity. Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, is frequently depicted as the paragon of dharma-bound masculinity. However, his story also involves exile, disguise (as Brihannala), and moral crisis (as seen in the Bhagavad Gita).

Anuja Chandramouli's retelling reinterprets these moments through a contemporary lens, highlighting how Arjuna's gender identity is shaped by societal norms and personal dilemmas.

The background of the novel retains mythological authenticity while infusing psychological realism. By exploring Arjuna's formative relationships—with Kunti, Draupadi, Krishna, and Karna—the narrative presents a multifaceted view of manhood that is both culturally rooted and critically reflective. Chandramouli's version avoids idolization; instead, it reveals Arjuna's conflicts, contradictions, and emotional struggles.

Objectives and Scope

This paper aims to:

- Examine how Chandramouli's Arjuna performs masculinity through multiple roles.
- Analyze how epic conventions and social expectations shape gender identity.
- Explore Arjuna's moments of emotional vulnerability and their implications for understanding masculinity.
- Investigate how the novel addresses the intersection of power, duty, and gender.
- Apply theoretical frameworks from Butler and Connell to decode performative masculinity in myth.

The scope includes close reading of the novel, contextualized within classical texts, gender studies, and modern reinterpretations of epic characters.

Historical and Cultural Perspective

Historically, the figure of Arjuna represents the dharmic ideal of masculinity. He is a peerless archer, the chosen disciple of Drona, and the favorite of Krishna. Yet, Arjuna's story includes moments that challenge this heroic ideal. His time as Brihannala—a eunuch dance teacher during the Pandavas' exile—is a key episode where gender performance becomes literal. Chandramouli explores this period not as a comic interlude but as a phase of reflection and transformation.

The novel also revisits Arjuna's internal conflict on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, famously captured in the Bhagavad Gita. His reluctance to fight, his grief, and his dialogue with Krishna reveal a man questioning not only his role but his identity. In Chandramouli's telling, these episodes are richly detailed to reveal a man torn between personal feeling and social duty. This historicized masculinity reveals that epic heroes were not unidimensional figures but products of cultural negotiation.

Performing Masculinity: Warrior, Lover, Exile

Arjuna's identity is constructed through multiple performative roles:

- **Warrior:** Arjuna's prowess in warfare is a performative display of ideal masculinity. Yet his self-doubt and aversion to fratricide complicate this ideal.
- **Lover and Husband:** His relationships with Draupadi and Subhadra are marked by affection and failure. The polyandrous arrangement with Draupadi often puts Arjuna in a conflicted position, both emotionally and ethically.
- **Exile and Disguise:** As Brihannala, Arjuna inhabits a feminine-coded role that challenges the binary of gender identity. Chandramouli explores this transformation not just as disguise, but as a space of introspection and gender fluidity.

These roles illustrate how masculinity in the epic tradition is not stable but is constantly enacted and re-evaluated in response to social expectations and moral crises.

Emotional Vulnerability and Moral Ambiguity

A striking element in Chandramouli's novel is its willingness to portray Arjuna's tears, hesitation, and guilt. These emotional expressions are often absent or underplayed in classical depictions of male heroes. By foregrounding Arjuna's interiority, Chandramouli humanizes the warrior-prince and challenges stoic masculine norms.

Moments such as Arjuna's reaction to Abhimanyu's death, his remorse over Karna's fate, and his silence during Draupadi's humiliation offer critical insight into the psychological toll of heroism. These emotional ruptures signify a masculinity that is fractured, empathetic, and painfully aware of its limitations.

Societal Reflections and Gender Ideology

Arjuna's journey is shaped by larger societal structures—patriarchy, caste hierarchy, and martial dharma. His adherence to these norms often places him in ethically compromising situations. Chandramouli's narrative subtly critiques these frameworks by showing how they constrain even the most exalted of men. The expectations placed upon Arjuna—as protector, son, and warrior—reflect the gendered burdens of performance. He is expected to kill, obey, and lead without faltering, despite inner conflict. The novel's portrayal of these tensions invites readers to reconsider traditional models of manhood and their relevance in contemporary gender discourse.

Narrative Technique and Psychological Realism

One of the distinct contributions of Chandramouli's novel lies in its narrative style—one that embraces psychological realism without sacrificing mythic grandeur. The omniscient narration does not merely chronicle Arjuna's exploits but delves into his mind, motivations, and emotions. This technique creates a more intimate and human portrayal of a mythological figure often idealized into abstraction.

Chandramouli uses inner monologue, internal conflict, and descriptive empathy to flesh out Arjuna's reactions to trauma, betrayal, love, and war. For instance, during the exile years, Arjuna is not portrayed merely as a meditating ascetic or a brooding warrior but as someone grappling with loneliness, nostalgia, and alienation. His time with Chitrangada in Manipur adds layers of tenderness and confusion, as he fathers a son (Babruvahana) whom he must later face in battle—another instance where myth confronts human emotion.

The novel thus becomes a vehicle for reflective storytelling, where Arjuna's masculinity is not static but questioned, troubled, and continuously shaped by experience. This internal dimension aligns with the idea that heroism is not incompatible with emotionality—an essential feminist redefinition of mythological masculinity.

Comparison with Other Epic Male Figures

A comparative reading of Arjuna alongside other epic males—such as Bhima, Karna, and even Krishna—reveals how Chandramouli's narrative subverts heroic conventions. While Bhima is defined by brute strength and Karna by loyalty and suffering, Arjuna's journey is one of learning, unlearning, and self-awareness.

His dynamic with Karna is particularly revealing. Karna, a rival archer and tragic brother, evokes both envy and admiration in Arjuna. Chandramouli renders this rivalry not just in terms of martial competition but also in terms of emotional contrast. Karna's unwavering loyalty to Duryodhana challenges Arjuna's

shifting loyalties, and their eventual confrontation becomes symbolic of ethical complexity rather than moral triumph.

Krishna, Arjuna's divine charioteer and spiritual guide, functions as a stabilizing figure, offering clarity when Arjuna falters. Their dialogues underscore the vulnerability of the human condition and the necessity of guidance in navigating dharma. Yet, Chandramouli does not strip Krishna of complexity; he is both playful and profound, divine and disturbingly enigmatic.

Feminine Influence and Gender Dynamics

Arjuna's character is also shaped by the powerful female presences in his life—Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra, Chitrangada, and Ulupi. These women are not merely love interests or maternal figures; they play critical roles in shaping Arjuna's emotional and moral development.

- **Kunti**, his mother, asserts her authority in ways that both protect and constrain him. Her command that Draupadi be shared among the brothers—though contextualized in the epic—haunts Arjuna's conscience and impacts his relationship with Draupadi.
- **Draupadi**, complex and proud, often challenges Arjuna's sense of entitlement and duty. Chandramouli portrays their relationship as passionate but strained, marked by misunderstandings, jealousy, and political tensions. Draupadi's humiliation in the Kaurava court and Arjuna's silence are portrayed as a point of rupture, raising questions about masculine complicity in female suffering.
- **Subhadra**, Arjuna's wife and sister of Krishna, brings out his softer, more nurturing side. Through their bond, Chandramouli explores domestic masculinity—care, tenderness, and fatherhood.

These interactions reveal the interdependency of gender performances, where masculinity is not constructed in isolation but in continual negotiation with femininity.

Conclusion

Anuja Chandramouli's retelling of Arjuna's life in *Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince* is a significant contribution to mythological literature and gender discourse. By blending psychological realism with epic narrative, she recasts Arjuna as a multidimensional figure whose masculinity is continuously performed, scrutinized, and reshaped. Her narrative challenges the idea of the invulnerable hero and instead offers a model of manhood that is emotional, ethical, and profoundly human.

Through her portrayal, Chandramouli invites readers to rethink what it means to be a hero—and more importantly, what it means to be a man—in a tradition that often upholds rigid norms. Arjuna becomes not a symbol of perfection, but a vessel for introspection, doubt, courage, and transformation.

In the context of contemporary gender debates, this novel serves as a literary space to explore alternative masculinities—ones that acknowledge vulnerability, value emotional truth, and strive for moral integrity. Ultimately, Arjuna's journey in this retelling is not only a saga of a warrior-prince but also a narrative of human becoming.

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