



INVESTIGATING ARJUNA'S IDENTITY AS A EUNUCH IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

Tulika Singh

*PhD in Ancient History, Centre for Historical Studies, School of Social Sciences,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India*

Introduction

This paper investigates Arjuna's identity as a eunuch during the Pāṇḍava's period of disguise in the thirteenth year of their exile in the text *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*), one of the two major epics of ancient India. It seeks to draw attention on the behaviour of the society towards his new identity vis-à-vis his original identity as a warrior hero. Employing the methodology of critical analysis of the text to explore certain crucial questions such as why does Arjuna as a eunuch remain confined to women's companionship in the court, whether this new identity brings him valour or contempt, and the reason behind it will aid in this endeavour. The second part of the paper aims to probe into Arjuna's sexuality as a eunuch. This section deals with the issue of its censorship on account of ulterior motives of the text. Therefore, through reading the text from a gendered perspective, the attempt is to analyse and question its viewpoint for a gender that is beyond 'normal' for the authorship and the intended audience. It is to be noted, however, that the current analysis is based on the section of the source, the *Virāṭa Parvan* of the *MBh*, which is limited in the sense that it is situated in the spatial setting of the court culture. Among the characters represented in the source, most of them come from the royal section of society. We somehow lack aspects or voices from other sections.

Keywords: *Third gender, gender identity, sexuality, censorship, abnormality*



Aarhat Publication & Aarhat Journals is licensed Based on a work at <http://www.aarhat.com/erj/>

Before I proceed in this paper, it is important to discuss the dating, authorship, reception, and provenance of the text in order to acknowledge its limitations. The Sanskrit text *MBh*, having almost 75,000 verses and eighteen *parvans* (books), is the longest poem in the world, and one of the most important texts of the Indian cultural tradition. The title of the text indicates its size and importance; 'mahā' means great in size, and 'bhārata' indicates that the two sets of cousins are descents of king Bharata. The text is referred variously as *itihāsa*, *ākhyāna*, the fifth *Veda*, and *Kṛṣṇa Veda*—named after the compiler Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa. It has been argued, however, that naming the *MBh* as the fifth *Veda* is inappropriate since unlike the Vedas, i.e., *śruti* or revelation, *itihāsa* is remembered tradition (Thapar, 2013: 146). The narrative text tells the story of the five Pāṇḍava brothers before, during, and after the war at Kurukṣetra, which happened between the Pāṇḍavas (sons of Pāṇḍu) and their hundred paternal cousins, Kauravas (sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the descendant of Kuru), for the kingship of their ancestral realm.

The *MBh*, like other epics, is believed to have evolved gradually from its 'open oral tradition' (ibid.: 149). It has been suggested that the text underwent three phases of modification: literary rendering of the original oral composition by Vyāsa; and interpolations by later redactors, perhaps the Bhṛgu, who disseminated the qualities of kingship and the



worship of Viṣṇu in the text (ibid.: 147). The origin of the oral composition of the epic poetry has been traced to the *dāna-stuti* hymns, *gāthās*, *nārāśaṃsīs*, and *ākhyānas* of the Vedic corpus. The composition was collated from bardic fragments and coalesced to form a narrative. The events described in the epic, therefore, predate the time of its composition and have incorporated interpolations. The opinion is that the interpolations absorb a sense of the changing present and strives to make connections with the past. Evidently, it has been noticed that the narrative sections of the text have an essence of clan societies, which are different from the later didactic interpolations discussing the qualities of kingship and related issues (ibid.: 144-45).

The description of incidents of diverse dates account to the various suggestions for dating the epic. The proposition for the unity of the text and its dating based on this premise (Sukthankar, 1957: 21) has been questioned on the ground that an epic cannot be a one-time composition (Thapar, 2013: 161). There have been attempts to date the Kurukṣetra war, the prominent event in the *MBh*, to fix a probable date for the text. The date 3102 BCE for the war on the basis of the end and beginning of the Dvāpara and Kali yuga respectively has been contradicted taking into consideration the dates of Purāṇic genealogies (ibid.: 162). Accounting to the similar nature of statements in the *Śānti* and *Anuśāsana parvans* to those in the Manu *Dharmaśāstra* and the Kauṭilya *Arthaśāstra*, a post-Mauryan date has also been suggested (ibid.: 163). However, a correlation with archaeological periodisation too does not bring the consensus for a date taking in view the contextual evidence of the text (ibid.: 163). Therefore, a plausible range of dates for the *MBh* has been proposed to be from the mid-first millennium BCE to the early first millennium CE.

The opinion about the geographical setting of the epic is that in the beginning, the epic was located in the western Ganges plain and disseminated to other parts from there. It is believed that in this process, many local narrative fragments were incorporated into the text which later on became its main part (ibid.: 163). Therefore, it has been inferred that the original compositions of the text have been in Prākṛit, which were later on rendered into Sanskrit on account of its political benefits (ibid.: 164). Pollock's analysis of the inevitable connection between written, literary language, and political power helps one to understand this rendering from Prākṛit into Sanskrit in a better manner (Pollock, 2007: 208).

A dual authorship in phases has been suggested for the text, i.e., the literary rendering of the oral compositions of the *sūtas* by Vyāsa in its first phase, and propagation of the ideas of kingship and new socio-religious aspects by Bhṛgu *brāhmaṇas*. The bardic presence is indicated through the existence of the bardic repertoire in the narrative, such as the inclusion of genealogies, the style of boxing in one story inside another, eulogies for the donors on receiving gifts. The motivation behind the bardic compositions could be their personal welfare in the *kṣatriya* territory. The eulogistic and panegyric accounts, in turn, could have proved to be crucial for the reputation of the *rājā* (Thapar, 2013: 165-6).

It is believed that the dual authorship also points towards the existing tension between the *brāhmaṇa* and non-*brāhmaṇa* elements. The Bhṛgu *brāhmaṇas* who redacted the text were the *brahma-kṣatra*, i.e., the *brāhmaṇas* who married into *kṣatriya* families and were occasional warriors who could have taken interest in reconstructing the *kṣatriya* tradition. Numerous myths are incorporated in the text to show the Bhṛgus' superiority to the *kṣatriyas* and even the gods. The Bhṛgus made redactions in the text at particular points of time, though alongside retained the sentiments of the previous authorship which helped them in deriving legitimacy through the interpolated narratives. It can be deduced that the Bhṛgu authorship aimed at redacting the ideas and situations which could be related by the numerous incorporated groups associated with Bhāgavatism in the text (ibid.: 166-8).



Arjuna's identity as a eunuch vis-à-vis his original identity

The *Virāṭa Parvan* of the *MBh* discusses the Pāṇḍavas' experience of their final year in exile, which they live disguised in the city of king Virāṭa. The Pāṇḍavas and their consort Draupadī choose disguise for themselves, so that as per the terms of exile they remain undiscovered for the next year. Yudhiṣṭhira takes the disguise of a Brahmin, Draupadī a hairdresser, Bhīma a warrior, the twins Nakula and Sahadeva undertake vaiśya occupations, and Arjuna a eunuch. There have been attempts to understand why Arjuna chose this particular disguise, which is exceptional to others in question. There is the view that his rejection of the *apsara* Urvaśī—whose liaison with Arjuna's ancestor Purūravas defines her relation with Arjuna as a mother—in his father's heavenly court draws upon him the curse to become a *napuṃsaka*, a feminised transvestite of ambiguous sex or feminised gender, and lose his manhood. After Indra intervenes in this matter, the curse is reduced to a period of one year. It is precisely because of this curse that it is necessary for Arjuna to take on the disguise of a eunuch (Goldman, 1993: 380). It is important to note that losing manhood and acquiring feminine attributes is regarded as a demeaning punishment, dangerous, and destructive for men, thereby degrading the women's sexuality.

Arjuna, the third of the Pāṇḍava brothers, has acquired ten names because of his virile strength and valour. These names are: Dhanañjaya (the conqueror of wealth and enemy), Arjuna (whose complexion it is difficult to match throughout the four ends of the earth, and who commits only pure acts), Phālguna (the one who was born on the Mount Himālaya on the day during the appearance of the constellation of Ūttara Phālguna), Savyasācīn (the one whose is ambidextrous and can draw the Gāṇḍīva with either hand), Jiṣṇu (the one who is unapproachable, inviolable, a tamer of enemies, and the son of the punisher of Paka), Bībhatsu (the one who does not undertake any unethical act during fights), Kirīṭīn (the acquirer of the crown of Śakra, the lord of *devas*), Śvetavāhana (the one who rides white horses decorated with gold), Vijaya (the one who does not return without victory from the battle), and Kṛṣṇa (the name given by his father because of his affection for a black-skinned dazzling boy) (*MBh*: IV.44.5-20). The text is replete with expressions like 'red-eyed man with long arms like elephant trunks' for Arjuna as a warrior hero. He is somebody whom men fear the most in battle. His firmness in battle makes him look like the king of the *gandharvas*, Indra in human form who had performed the hundred sacrifices, Śiva with trident in hand, among others. When he plucks his bow, Gāṇḍīva, it reverberates as if there has been a crash between two mighty mountains (*MBh*: IV.44.25-45.15). Arjuna, in his original identity, therefore, is an extraordinary warrior who is capable of doing wonders in the battlefield, and who upholds and acts in accordance with *kṣatriya-dharma*. And hence, a perfect personification of all that a king of valour should be. Arjuna remains the central character of the *MBh* despite being the third among the Pāṇḍavas (Allen, 1999: 403). It is to be noted that one of the reasons behind exceptionality and prowess of Arjuna is that he is called a *brahmachāri* (celibate), as he approaches his wives only for purposes of procreation (Vanita and Kidwai, 2001: 9).

However, Arjuna as Bṛhannalā, meaning lady with the large reed, does not carry any of this gallantry. (S)he merely serves in the court of Virāṭa as a music and dance instructor to his daughter and remains confined in the company of women. This confinement is because of the fact that the feminised transvestite cannot be associated with that part of the royal culture where men have their say. The companionship of men is out of question and this seems to have been accepted for a fact in society. This explains why unlike Yudhiṣṭhira, Bṛhannalā was not around king and his assembly. It is also to be noted that the attributes of manliness in Bṛhannalā on the battlefield, where (s)he appears before them



in pure red garments and a long braid, surprises the Kurus. They observe that the person can be none other than Dhanañjaya (*MBh*: IV.38.30-5, IV.39.1-10). It appears that this opinion comes from the understanding that a eunuch exhibits feminine gestures. This draws our attention to the fact that among the multifaceted gender associations that a transvestite has, eunuchs are closely related to women. It is perhaps because of this reason that due credibility has not been given to their identity, given the patriarchal cultures' ambivalent construction of women and their sexuality.

The varied expressions of apathy and denial towards Bṛhannalā, her strength, intelligence, and appearance are indicative of the fact that a transgression from the established gendered roles is to be questioned, viewed with disgust, and looked down upon. Having the identity of eunuch is a predicament and punishment, as it does not conform to the hegemonic idea of gender. Draupadī is visibly disturbed seeing Arjuna in the appearance of a eunuch and finding him in the company of women all the time. She expresses how much Bṛhannalā's braids, curls, golden earrings, conch bracelets on wrists, and clothes grieves her. She laments about this to Bhīma when she goes to convince him to assassinate Kīcaka (*MBh*: IV.19.15-30). Uttara, son of Virāṭa, on knowing that Bṛhannalā is not a eunuch but Arjuna is surprised that such a great warrior and the greatest of men has to live in a disguise which is despised by the world (*MBh*: IV.45.10-20). Virāṭa is infuriated when he is informed that the prince Uttara has gone to fight with the Kurus with a eunuch. He rebukes Yudhiṣṭhira hoarsely on his repetitive appraisals for Bṛhannalā, a eunuch. He finds it contemptuous that his son is compared with a eunuch. He is enraged to the extent that he hits Yudhiṣṭhira with the dice out of anger (*MBh*: 4.68.20-50).

It is also to be noted that many of the important heroes of the Bhārata dynasty such as Ila, Yayāti, Puru, Pāṇḍu, have to lose or suppress their virility, either on a temporary or permanent basis. However, the early Indian literature exhibits very scanty references of a reverse metamorphosis, i.e., female to male transsexualism (Goldman, 1993: 380; Vanita and Kidwai, 2001: 18).ⁱ It has been plausibly argued that despite the apparent misogyny, the emphasis towards the male to female transsexualism is on account of men's enchantment towards portraying themselves as 'culturally validated authority figures' (Goldman, 1993: 397).

Apprehension over loss of potency is emphasized in the text. Draupadī is concerned that Arjuna as Bṛhannalā is impotent. This loss symbolises lack of manliness. It has been observed that an enhancement in this uneasiness was one of the advances of the later Vedic period. Terms like *napuṃsaka*, *klība*, and *paṇḍaka* were included in the vocabulary of the period, the last two of which originally referred to 'impotent man'. This entailed a change of category from sexually defective male to equivocal sexuality. Further additions in connotation of the term *klība* incorporated several other attributes (Zwilling and Sweet, 2000: 104-6). Thus, the term referred not just to impotence, but also to a male who has acquired feminine attributes and interests, such as long hair style, wearing ornaments, performing feminine activities like dancing, et cetera. It, therefore, encompassed several meanings:

“It is a catch-all term that traditional Hindus coined to indicate a man who is in their terms sexually dysfunctional (or in ours, sexually challenged), including someone who was sterile, impotent, castrated, a transvestite, a man who had oral sex with other men, who had anal sex, a man with mutilated or defective sexual organs, a hermaphrodite, or, finally, a man who produced only female children.”

(Doniger, 2014: 315)

However, concerns have been raised over whether defining *klība* as eunuch is correct or impotent would be a better rendering for this term (Sharma, 1993: 48). In the *Virāṭa Parvan*, Bṛhannalā is referred as impotent because of her/his



feminine attributes, which in turn is a manifestation of the larger understanding of a eunuch/impotent in the society.

Censorship of Bṛhannalā's sexuality

The description of the incident when Sudakṣiṇā, daughter of the king Virāṭa, was asked to approach Bṛhannalā to convince him to become Uttara's charioteer for his fight with the Kurus, hints at an affectionate bond between Bṛhannalā and Sudakṣiṇā. The way the author has narrated this makes one suggest this.

“The beautiful girl, each of whose close-fitting thighs were like an elephant's trunk, the faultless girl with straight teeth and slim waist, adorned with an excellent garland, approached Pārtha as a female elephant approaches a male.” (MBh: IV.37.5) ii

Sudakṣiṇā further says to Bṛhannalā:

“If you do not act in accordance with my request, even when I have commanded you, asking out of affection, then I will forsake my life!” (MBh: IV.37.15)

Given that Bṛhannalā has been around Sudakṣiṇā throughout, it maybe plausible to think that both of them could have the possibility of developing affection towards each other.

However, one finds that towards the end of the book, Bṛhannalā, now Arjuna after revealing his true identity to the king Virāṭa, perhaps a conscious and intelligible effort has been made by the author to elucidate that Arjuna has been considering Sudakṣiṇā as his daughter all the time. He refuses Virāṭa's offer to marry his daughter and instead expresses his desire to become her father-in-law and form an alliance between the Matsyas and the Bharatas (MBh: IV.71.34-5). He further clarifies that despite spending time with her in the inner apartment alone, she has treated him as a father, both in private and in public places. By this, he seeks to prove Sudakṣiṇā's purity and refutes any false suspicion that may occur about them (MBh: IV.72.2-7).

At this juncture, the curious aspect one is left to ponder is that the text otherwise associates Bṛhannalā with feminine attributes and female companionship throughout her existence in the narrative, however, keeping in mind the necessity of proving Arjuna's, i.e., a *kṣatriya's* sanctity before starting a new phase of the Pāṇḍavas' life, the text deliberately molds the narrative in this way and brings this point to fore. Nonetheless, this has been presented in a way that it seems to discuss Sudakṣiṇā's chastity, underlining which are two salient contexts: the attempt to censor Bṛhannalā's sexuality, and demonstrating Arjuna's character in accordance with *dharma*. The critical historical period—the ensuing tension between the Buddhists and the Brahmins after the emergence of Buddhism and rise of Aśoka – that precedes the compilation of the text necessitates that the text conforms to the laws of *dharma*. It is important to note, however, that the definition of *dharma* in the MBh is often under contestation both “explicitly and implicitly” and its depiction is “varied and elusive” (Fitzgerald, 2004: 671).

Conclusion

This paper referred to the text *Virāṭa Parvan* of the MBh to analyse Arjuna's identity as a eunuch in multifaceted contexts. An exploration of his temporary identity as a eunuch vis-à-vis his original identity brings to fore some important aspects of gender and sexuality in the ancient Indian context. The general practice of male to female transsexualism, despite the pervasive misogynistic viewpoint of the society, points to the perspective that the patriarchal setting strove for cultural validation of their authoritative figures. This could have been possible by



deprecating the transformed identities by not giving them due credibility and importance. This also explains why there have been very scant references of reverse metamorphism, i.e., female to male transsexualism. It is on account of these hegemonic ideas of gender that transsexualism is perceived as a demeaning punishment. A part of the problem is also because of its close association with women, given that the ancient Indian literature is replete with expressions of hostile attitudes towards women, their strength, intelligence, capabilities for spiritual liberation, as also their anatomy. Arjuna in his original identity is an embodiment of all that a king should be. His temporary identity as a eunuch stands contrary to this embodiment, i.e., all that a king should not be, as per the prevalent norms in the society. Bṛhannalā the charioteer possesses different attributes from Bṛhannalā the dancer, for Bṛhannalā the charioteer could show his/her manly traits, something that is beyond the horizon of what is normal for society. These instances of reinforcement of deeply ingrained patriarchal attitudes contribute substantially to further denigration of the sexuality of transsexuals. It is in this context that the paper has also discussed the ulterior motives of the text behind the censorship of Bṛhannalā's sexuality.

At the end, it is pertinent to mention that the theme as well as the issues in question involve in-depth study and analysis of other literatures of the period to acquire a holistic view. I plan to expand the horizons of this study at multiple levels. For my future research on this theme, among others aspects, I believe it would be promising to examine the close relationship between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa as indicated in the texts.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Garbutt, K. (Trans.). (2006). *Maha.bhārata Book Four: Virāṭa*. The Clay Sanskrit Library: New York University Press & JJC Foundation.

Bibek. D. (Trans.). (2015). *The Mahabharata Volume 4 (Sections 45 to 59)*. Haryana: Penguin Books.

Buitenen, J.A.B. Van. (Trans.). (1980). *The Mahābhārata: The Book of Virāṭa. The Book of the Effort*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

i Vanita and Kidwai point out the case of Ambā who reborns as a girl, Śikhaṇḍīn(ī), despite the boon she receives. She has to be changed (not reborn) into a man for exercising the boon (2001: 18). In the later *Purāṇas*, however, a new pattern emerges on account of Vaiṣṇava devotion wherein we see increasing aspiration of men to become women, who live close to god (ibid., 65).

ii The translation by Bibek Debroy differs slightly in translation of these verses. Instead of a female elephant approaching a male elephant, he translates these verses as an elephant-calf approaching a female elephant. This, however, does not alter the broad argument I have made in this paper.

The Mahabharatam: Text as Constituted in Its Critical Edition. (1919-1966). Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Vol. 4 *Virāṭa Parva*.

Secondary Sources

Allen, N. J. (1999). Arjuna and the Second Function: A Dumézilian Crux. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 9(3), 403-418.

Brodbeck, S., & Black, B. (Eds.). (2007). *Gender and Narratives in the Mahabharata*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.



- Doniger, W. (1999). *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*. Chicago, US: University of Chicago Press.
- Doniger, W. (2014). *On Hinduism*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzgerald, J. L. (2004). Dharma and Its Translation in the *Mahābhārata*. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 32(5-6), 671-685.
- Goldman, R. P. (1993). Transsexualism, Gender and Anxiety in Traditional India. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 113(3), 374-401.
- Pollock, S. (2011). *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Sharma, A. Homosexuality and Hinduism. In A. Swedler (Ed.), *Homosexuality and World Religions* (pp. 47-80). Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1993.
- Sukthankar, V. S. (1957). *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*. New Delhi: The Asiatic Society of Bombay.
- Thapar, R. (1979). The Historian and the Epic. *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 60(1/4), 199-213.
- Thapar, R. (2013). *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India*. London: Harvard University Press.
- Vanita, R. & Kidwai, S. (Eds.). (2001) *Same Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*. New York: Palgrave.
- Zwilling, L. & Sweet, M. J. (2000). The Evolution of Third Sex Constructs in Ancient India: A study in Ambiguity. In J. Leslie & M. McGee (Eds.), *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India* (pp. 99-132). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Vanita and Kidwai point out the case of Ambā who reborns as a girl, Śikhaṇḍīnī, despite the boon she receives. She has to be changed (not reborn) into a man for exercising the boon (2001: 18). In the later *Purāṇas*, however, a new pattern emerges on account of Vaiṣṇava devotion wherein we see increasing aspiration of men to become women, who live close to god (ibid., 65).
- The translation by Bibek Debroy differs slightly in translation of these verses. Instead of a female elephant approaching a male elephant, he translates these verses as an elephant-calf approaching a female elephant. This, however, does not alter the broad argument I have made in this paper.