

## The Queerness in Shikhandi: Concerning Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*

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### Abstract

Queer theory is a realm of critical theory that developed within/in the early 1990s, out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. Shikhandi is an important character in the Mahabharata. Hindu tales have many references to queerness; one among them is the story of Shikhandi, a woman who became a man. The gender of Shikhandi is a controversial subject, in epics especially in Mahabharata, men are considered as great warriors, full of masculinity and resilience. But while approaching the text from a postmodernist perspective, we can analyze the gender of Shikhandi as the 'other gender', Mahabharata, which means great India have much popularity in India, as Homer's poems over the Greeks. This paper seeks to examine, how the character of Shikhandi in Mahabharata, who is neglected in the society, the queerness in Shikhandi which is flexible and fluid made him/her a remarkable character in the great epic.

Keywords: Queer, Trans-gender, Trans-sexual, Gender, Epic

Mahabharata is one of the oldest and largest Indian epic. It is considered as the most significant epics out of the two Ramayana and Mahabharata. Mahabharata is about the battle

between Pandavas and Kauravas, It also encompasses tremendous religious value and Conspiracy. There are different versions of Mahabharata accessible all over the world. Among that, the story of Shikhandi also varies from version to version. The most popular part of Mahabharata is Bhagavadgita. Mahabharata consists of 18 parvans and the oldest version comprises 200000 verses. It is composed in the Sanskrit language. Shikhandi was professed to be one of the 'neuter genders'. He was born as a girl named Shikhandini to the Panchala king Draupada. Shikhandi fought in the Kurukshetra war for the Pandavas and became the reason for the death of Bhishma, one of the greatest archers and warriors of his time, the disciple of Parasuram. Queerness is not only modern, western, or sexual says Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Shikhandi and other queer tales they don't tell you*. Queer theory's intentional objective is to act as a lens or tool to deconstruct the prevailing monolithic social norms and taxonomies and scrutinize how and why they came into being. Queer theory is applied in the historical context, especially by analyzing the discourse of homosexuality.

Hindu traditional literary sources say little about homosexuality directly. Homoeroticism in traditional texts is often masked by adherence to strict gender and caste rules. Robert P Goldman writes of transgenderism in Hindu literature: "Few cultures have accorded this phenomenon so prominent a place in the realms of mythology and religion as has that of traditional India." Goldman considers the numerous myths concerning gender change to be a manifestation of patriarchal cultures' desire to control the sexuality of women, but writes that many myths "project a positive valuation of women and femininity". Changes in gender may be caused by a God or through the use of magic, to deceive others or to facilitate a romantic encounter. A gender change may also occur spontaneously due to changes in a person's spiritual or moral character, either in a single life or through reincarnation. The virtually universal theme of transsexualism, the idea that a person can or

should under certain circumstances change his or her original sex has had a particularly long, complex, and productive history in South Asia.

Shikhandi is neither man nor woman, born as a woman, the eldest child of King Drupad, father of Draupadi, and elder sibling to Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi - the twins. When Bhishma, the prince of Hastinapur was a young boy, his father king Shantanu - a widower wanted to be a householder again. The woman he had set his heart upon demanded that Bhishma should not rival her to-be offspring for the status of heir apparent. Bhishma made a tough vow to never marry and to remain celibate. The half-brother he doted upon Vichitravirya soon came of age. The future king of Hastinapur would now marry. The elder sibling Bhishma heard of a Swayamwar arranged by the king of Kashipura for the marriage of his three daughters - Amba, Ambika and Ambalika. Bhishma gallantly rode up to Kashipur and carried away all the three princesses to become the wives of his half-brother. Amba, however, kept on compelling him to let go as she and Salva, the king of Saubala, were secretly in love and Amba had promised to place the varmala in his neck at the swayamwara, the ceremony where the women choose their grooms from among those present. On reaching Hastinapur, when Amba refused to marry the Kauravaprince, Bhishma finally let her go. When she returned to Salva, he forbade to carry forth their relationship or marry her as now she was 'soiled' by having been snatched by another man. Heartbroken and offended, Amba then proceeded to do severe penance. Distressing inside, that the act of the senior Kuru prince Bhishma had destroyed her life, she urged vengeance. She was overwhelmed that Bhishma had carried her away though he was proclaimed celibate and must pay for it. God is happy with her penance and gave her a garland that when worn by anyone would enable him to kill Bhishma. But Bhishma was so revered and worried, in that era that no man agreed to wear that garland. Amba herself could not use it as a woman could not beckon Bhishma to a fight. Before dying heartbroken, she drooped the garland on a door of King Drupad's palace. The

king was childless. Soon the king begot three children through a Yaga. The eldest was Amba reborn and was named Shikhandini. The physicians and the astrologers could not decide whether the baby was a boy or a girl. She was brought up as a boy but could claim manhood only when a Yaksha gave her/his male form after Shikhandi's marriage. Shikhandi, the Amba of last birth, had two siblings - the twins Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna. Draupadi then married Arjuna, the son of Ambalika's son Pandu. Meanwhile, Shikhandi had abducted the garland she had left on the entrance in her last birth, thus enabling herself to become Bhishma's slayer. Now that she had the entity of man in her, she qualified to carry out the task. On the tenth day of the war between the Pandavas and Kauravas during the battle at Kurukshetra, the unbeatable Bhishma was proving to be too much of an enemy and Lord Krishna also charioteer to Arjuna, relinquished that Bhishma must die for Arjuna to make any headway in the war. But how can even Arjun try aiming Bhishma when he would not lower his weapons. Arjuna hid behind Shikhandi, seeing whom Bhishma lowered his weapons declaring, 'Born a woman you are always a woman.' Arjuna saw the chance as Bhishma lowered his bow and arrow; he sent forth a volley of arrows that ultimately killed Bhishma. Thus Shikhandi, a so-called hijra - a person neither man nor woman, became the cause of Bhishma's death. Even though Pandavas won the battle, on the same night of victory, Drona's sin assaulted Pandavas. Draupadi's son was beheaded, her brothers Dhrishtadyumna and Shikhandi were similarly sent to demise. Devdutt Pattanaik in his book *Shikhandi and other queer tales they don't tell you say that*:

Shikhandini, who became Shikhandi, is what modern queer vocabulary would call a female to male transexual, as her body goes through a very specific change genitally. But retellers avoid details and tend to portray him/her either as a eunuch (castrated male), a male to female transexual (a man who rejects his male biology), a male to female transgender (a man who wears women's clothes as he feels like a woman), an

intersexed hermaphrodite, or simply a man who was a woman (Amba) in his past life.

It reveals a patriarchal bias even in the queer space. (46)

### Conclusion

Shikhandi is considered as an inevitable character because he became the cause of the death of Bhishma. The death of Shikhandi himself is not mentioned in any of the versions of Mahabharata. He is not considered a great warrior or a perfect man or woman. Devdutt Pattanaik in his book mentions that: No author has yet explored the relationship of Draupadi, the complete woman, and Dhrishtadyumna, the complete man, with Shikhandi, who is neither a complete woman nor a complete man...And about Shikhandi's relationship with his wife... (48). When the queer is pointed out in Hindu stories, symbols, and rituals, they are often explained away in metaphysical terms. No attempt is made to enquire, interrogate and widen vision. Thus is queerness rendered invisible (31). Gender is considered as a flexible one in ancient epic and queerness is not a modern construction. But the most striking matter is Indian Supreme Court legally declared transgender as the third sex only as late as April 2014.

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