

ABSTRACT

Myths form a part of most cultures, serving various social and psychological functions. Scholars studying the concept of myths have emphasised that humans need myths and mythology. They serve various functions in human life including providing an answer to the mystery of the universe, providing spiritual comfort, supporting and validating a status quo in society, and most importantly teaching one how to live a human life under any circumstances. Mythology can be an enriching, life-nourishing subject. From mythological rites to religious rituals, we are surrounded by mythology.

Mythological stories and figures have maintained an imminent importance in Indian society. The majoritarian Hindu tradition has always referred to the epics and its characters for references to modern life. Thus, it is common for people to still speculate about the epics. Hindu communities foster a wide range of beliefs and consider a number of texts to be sacred. For every story, situation, or phenomena, there is a Hindu God and a Hindu way of life. Every living organism is believed to have divine potential and every God can be seen encompassing male, female, and neuter forms. For over two millennia, variations in gender and sexuality have been discussed in Hindu texts. Sacred texts like the *Kamasutra* contain irrefutable evidence of the range of sexual behaviours known to ancient Hindus. It is only after the arrival of European Christians that homophobia was inculcated in Indian society, and Indian nationalists, including Hindus, soon imbibed Victorian ideals of homophobia and heterosexual monogamy. The study of the trajectory of Hindu texts with relation to gender and sexual variations is hence important as over the last two decades the media has reported a series of same-sex weddings as well as joint suicides. Most of them were Hindus. The weddings would take place according to Hindu rites with familial support. The suicides, on the other hand, are a result of families forcibly separating the couple and forcing them into heterosexual marriages. The attitudes towards homosexuality today, hence varies from community to community and even family to family. Most declare homosexuality to be alien to Indian culture and tradition and has been imported from the West. In addition to these, the Indian government has time and again opposed the legalisation of matters related to the LGBTQ+ community, including, most recently, the legalisation of same-sex marriages in India—a law, if created, would benefit the community immensely.

With such popularity of mythology still existing in India and mythology often being wrongly used as a justification for homophobia, it becomes necessary to look into the source of it all—the sacred texts. A major point of interest in recent popular culture trends in India has been regarding the retellings and adaptations of old Indian mythological folklores. A rise can be seen in the works of an emerging genre called ‘mythological fiction’ that retells the stories of the epics through new lenses. It is interesting to note that the epics, in spite of being an ancient culture, has never truly left the Indian society. One of the main proponents of keeping the epics alive within the Indian society has been literature. These mythological stories and characters have been a favourite subject for literature to portray. The evolution of the characters also helps in discerning the psyche of the Indian society and their perceptions regarding various societal issues, including the issues and concerns of the LGBTQ+ community. The portrayal of the community in these productions depict clearly the standards set by the Indian society for them and how they are perceived. In order to discern this portrayal, or the lack thereof, it is necessary to look into the mainstream adaptations of mythological stories that cater to all age groups and understands how the misrepresentation or the absence of representation impacts the community. However, after revisiting the mythological works, it is evident that many queer references made in these works get manipulated or omitted in their representation/retellings in popular culture. The influence of these misrepresentations begins from childhood itself, and in India, the comic book giant, *Amar Chitra Katha*, has been crucial in influencing the young minds. Although the most important objective of the series was the educate the Indian children about their classical and religious heritage, the series has been often accused of being nationalistic, contriving to show India as a homogenous entity, and ignoring the inner political and social tensions. It has also been accused of omissions in its library of modern hagiographies with relation to particular religious minorities, women, lower castes, and gender and sexual minorities. It can be argued that as the series was compiled at a time when nation-building and national integration was of primary importance, the series strove to provide a harmonious and homogenous portrait of the nation and its people without portraying the internal turmoil and tension. However, in spite of reprints, the narratives have remained unchanged till this date.

The ideas, thus, incurred from these misrepresentations are then strengthened in their adolescence and adult life. My research will, hence, inspect these popular representations of the mythologies like the *Amar Chitra Katha* and compare them to the original work in order to highlight the deliberate discrepancies, omissions, and manipulations in the representations that caters to the heteronormative construct. It will also evaluate the effect that these manipulations have on the mind of the masses and how it influences their opinions on the legitimacy of queer around them. Although many studies have examined the misrepresentations and manipulations by *Amar Chitra Katha* over the years, there is a lack of research on how queer narratives specifically have been manipulated and misrepresented in the series. This research gap limits our understanding of how queer politics may be perceived and accepted in today's society. My thesis shall, thus, conduct a comparative analysis of the original epic *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana-Vyasa* by Kisari Mohan Ganguli and *Amar Chitra Katha's Mahabharata*, as the original work features a range of queer references in its text but its retelling by *Amar Chitra Katha*, which is one of the most popular retellings in India, lack many of those elements.

Keywords: Queer, *Amar Chitra Katha*, Mahabharata, Representation, Ancient Indian Literature, Mythology