

Chapter 4

Locating Misrepresentation: A Comparative Analysis of *Amar Chitra Katha's Mahabharata* and Kishori Mohan Ganguli's *The Mahabharata of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa*

In Chapter Two, I identified the different categories of Queer in ancient Indian literature, and discussed the representation of various Queer gods and goddesses in different mythologies. In Chapter Three, I discussed the politics of omission and distortion in mythological comic books and its effects on the education system in India. In this chapter, I shall draw on my findings from the previous chapters and attempt to show how different queer characters in the Mahabharata have been misrepresented and their narrative has been distorted in the mythological comic books taught to children in India. The cultures that are called Hindu allow for a diversity of belief and practice ranging from monotheism, polytheism, and, according to nineteenth century German Indologist Max Muller, henotheism (choosing one deity for special worship while not disbelieving in others) to animism, atheism, and agnosticism. Of these it is the thriving culture of polytheism and henotheism that has survived over the centuries and is most remarkable for its flexibility, tolerance and ability to change and grow. In Hindu texts and traditions, there is a god or a story or a variation of a story for practically every way of life (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 1). There are certain patterns and tropes that emerge in ancient Indian writing as areas for the representation of same-sex attachment and continue to be influential even today. These tropes are: friendships as life defining, expressed in a queer-platonic manner; sex change and crossdressing; moving beyond gender; and rebirth as the explanation for all forms of love, including same-sex love. Resistance or objection to the institution of marriage often acts as a space where same sex or asexual attachments can flourish. These patterns acquire different dimensions in Hindu texts.

Mythological stories and figures have maintained imminent importance in Indian society. The majoritarian Hindu tradition has always referred to myths and their characters as references to modern life. Thus, it is common in recent times for people to still speculate about Hindu mythology. In India, the Puranas mention two different sexes of human beings, namely the *Purusha* (male) and *Prakriti*(female). But it also recognized the existence of another sex, the *Tritya Prakriti* or third gender. The

Sanskrit language mentions the existence of four gender states—*Pung* (masculine), *Stree* (feminine), *Kliba* (neutral), and *Ubhayalinga* (common gender). The *Vedas* talk about “Gender identity” and “Sexual Identity” which reveals the presence of queerness in Indian contexts many centuries ago (Wilhem, 2008, 10). Hinduism, during the era of the composition of the scriptures and epics, was more accommodating of queer communities and people as can be observed through the depictions of Mohini, Shikhandi, Ardhanareshwar, and so on. Even the gods and goddesses in Hindu mythic stories exhibit gender fluidity and queer orientation. In ancient Indian literature, stories of gods transitioning into goddesses emerged in the scriptures. There are mentions of third-gendered gods and even some that manifest all three genders, along with mentions of gods that cross-dress, without any gender transition (Debroy, 1994, 287). Various examples of this can be found in the scriptures, where many characters emerge who are characterized by their queerness. Some of these characters are Brihannala, Shikhandi, Bhagashavana, Yuvanashva, Ila, Mohini, and so on.

The Mahabharata is the one of the greatest epics of India that reached its final form between 300 BCE and 300 CE. In the present form, it has eighteen parvas or chapters. The epic is made of one hundred thousand verses. Vyasa through this tale, concentrated on all aspects of human existence such as connection with the self and the society, and its ethics, and codes of *dharma*. In addition to these, the Mahabharata also represents a number of queer characters in its narrative (Mohammed, 2018, 154-155). Characters such as Shikhandi, Brihannala, Mohini, Krishna, and so on redefine gender norms by changing the boundaries of masculine and feminine identity. Thus, they depict signs of de-gendering, gender blending, and gender-bending. De-gendering is the action of de-gender; the removal of gender distinctions. Ideational change in the ‘gender contract’ – the shape of the gender order under historically specific circumstances – interacted with change at the other levels of the gender contract, the institutional and the individual level (Lorber, 2005, 7-8). Gender blending is dressing and behaving in a way that blends the characteristics of both sexes. Aaron Devor’s *Gender Blending* is a path-finding study that creates a new frontier in sex and gender research. In this work, the author explicates the quadruple helix of sex (biological status), gender (social status as either a man or a woman), sex identity (personal acceptance ‘in a particular sex category as either a male or a

female'), and gender role (those actions, thoughts, behaviours, and beliefs which distinguish one as a member of a gender category, that is, masculinity and femininity). It challenges conventional clinical typologies of transsexualism and transvestism by presenting gender identity as dynamic and socially embedded in a complex web of meanings and interactions (Devor, 1989, 7).

A gender bender is a person who dresses up and acts like the opposite sex. Gender-bending may be political, stemming from the early identity politics movements of the 1960s and 1970s, a guiding principle of which is the idea that the personal is political. Gender-bending is commonly used as a rebellion against socially constructed expectations of gender and gender roles, which can vary widely between cultures, though commonly include some variation of the gender binary - the idea that only two genders exist: men and women. In many cultures, it is only acceptable for an individual to embody one of these two gender roles, which often mimic the social expectations of the sexual categories of "male" and "female" (Devor, 1989, 43).

According to Butler, gender is something that is performed; it only holds cultural significance to the extent that this is ascribed to it. Her concept of "gender performativity" is the idea that people choose to perform gender in a context in which we are given very few socially acceptable choices, but can be explained as being similar to what actors do in front of the camera. Butler explains that if gender is something that sexed bodies assimilate to in order to follow the societal codes of what is appropriate behaviour, then those actions can be conceptualized in different ways to allow more flexibility for individuals (Butler, 2007, 187).

In the Mahabharata, the characters of Krishna, Shikhandi, Brihannala, Mohini, Iravan, Chitrangada, and Bheeshma exhibit signs of de-gendering, gender blending, and gender-bending, the aspects of which shall be analysed in this chapter. While these characters in the narrative of the Mahabharata retain their queer characteristics, most retellings and adaptations of their stories depict them as alluding to a masculinist or feminine identity, thus completely subduing and ignoring the fluid aspects of their characters. Thus, readers of their stories are exposed to only this masculinist or feminine aspect while remaining completely ignorant about their queer aspects. Such focused partial exposure, unfortunately, begins at a very young age through the works of children's literature.

Traditionally speaking, children's literature can be defined as literature meant for children. Children's literature is in fact, one of the few types of literature defined by the age group of its presumed audience. Most definitions of children's literature have taken it as a given that it is the literature produced for children by adults. However, scholarship in children's literature has evolved from being meant just for children to including topics of race, gender, sexuality, and social class in constructing childhood. Work on race, gender, sexuality, or social class serves as a means to pierce the idealization of childhood, as scholars reckon with the ways in which childhood is not always a sheltered and cherished space but one where children face similar challenges to their adult counterparts, with the literature reflecting those challenges (Hunt, 1999, 3-4). Children's literature refers both to a subset of literary works and to a field of academic study. As an academic field, it draws from several disciplines including literary study, education, developmental psychology, and librarianship. It covers the genres of comics, picture books, and traditional literature including folktales, myths, fables, fantasy, realistic, mystery and science fiction, non-fiction, biography, autobiography, poetry, verse, and so on. Of these, comics have created a niche for themselves as the genre to dominate its readership. Traditionally, children's literature scholars have treated comics for and about children in a sweeping manner without a sustained interest; this lapse has sorely impoverished the field. This approach is, at last, starting to change, as children's literature scholars are showing a new and unprecedented curiosity about comic art. Clearly, there have been cursory attempts to position comics vis-à-vis children's literature. Unfortunately, until recently the sustained aesthetic study of comics alongside, rather than in contra-distinction to, children's books has been neglected. This represents not simply a blind spot in the field of children's literature studies, but arguably one of those constitutive absences around which the field has built itself. This is unfortunate given that comics are a lively, diverse global phenomenon that is strongly associated with childhood. For reasons having nothing to do with ease or simplicity of reading, they ought to have a more prominent place in children's literature studies (Meskin, 2007, 373; Meskin, 2009, 225).

Children's literature in India, especially works of folklore and mythology, has been a very influential source of information for young children. It is hence necessary to monitor the ideas propagated by this literature and the impact it has on the minds of

the children. One such very influential franchise in India that is known for having a profound impact on many children from a very young age, as established in previous chapters, is the *Amar Chitra Katha*.

In 1967, Anant Pai launched a series of picture books for children aimed to bring back the rich heritage and past of India. This series, titled, *Amar Chitra Katha*, became very popular among both children and adults alike and soon became a staple of every middle-class Indian household. Produced on newsprint, with colorful illustrations presented in a comic-book format, libraries, railway stations, and roadside bookstalls began to be flooded with copies of this popular book series. The books covered everything from the tales of great heroes and (a few) heroines, deities, warriors, political figures, and popular folk tales. The book became responsible for a renewed interest in the history of the country and also promoted a sense of nationalism through its narrative (McLain, 2009, 3-4).

However, the sense of nationalism promoted by the series was mostly based on the middle-class, upper-caste, Hindu realm of society and thus its claim to bring back the history of India became the history of only a certain group (Sreenivas, 2010, 6). Most prominent of the notions created by the series was the idea of masculinity and femininity. All the mythological books in the series that told the story of men as central figures portrayed them as fair-complexioned, muscular, and heroic whereas the mythological stories told of women in this series portrayed them as fair-skinned, slender, and meek. These men and women belonged inevitably to the upper caste and had an air of holiness and purity about them. The men maintained the personality of a warrior/hero whereas the women maintained the personality of a devoted wife, mother, or daughter. They are depicted to be rigid upholders of *dharma* who have maintained their composure, dignity, and docility in accordance with societal standards, even in the worst circumstances. The men would be depicted to be violent but also benevolent (McLain, 2009, 53-55). Thus, the series was establishing not only an idea of masculinity and femininity but also suppressing any other queer aspects of the character through their rigid portrayal.

In a country like India, where mythological characters are worshipped as deities and children are taught to emulate their qualities as role models as established in Chapter Three, the manner of the portrayal of these characters becomes extremely important.

For a child reading the titles depicting the mythological characters, it becomes beyond a mere comic book and also forms their outlook on society and themselves. Thus, a pictorial book on a queer character not only informs the child about the character but the values presented in the book and the manner of portrayal that forms their idea of queerness. There are no titles in *Amar Chitra Katha* that depict queer characters represented in mythology or history. Even mythological characters who have a queer identity are either portrayed as rigidly masculine or feminine. The analysis of such characters in the Mahabharata is presented below:

I. Krishna:

One of the most dynamic characters in Hindu mythology is the character of Krishna. Considered to be one of the ten avatars of Vishnu, Krishna is believed to be one of the most formidable of Vishnu's avatars. In addition to being one of the greatest warriors in Hindu mythology, Krishna is also known for his romantic and fluid identity. While commentaries on Krishna by male Brahmin scholars such as Shankara, Madhava, and Ramanuja, who chose to be celibate, portray him as a masculine warrior instigating Arjuna to fight and cause war, commentaries such as the *Shrimad Bhagavatam*, see Krishna in feminine terms (Enswistle, 1987, 91-92). Krishna, in such commentaries, is seen as a cross-dressing, gender-fluid being who is immensely comfortable in both his masculine and feminine identities, and adheres to both and none simultaneously (Enswistle, 1987, 94).

Amar Chitra Katha's Krishna is its first and most famous title. There have been nine titles of works released based on Krishna, including a special issue called *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar. Krishna* (1967) was the first title of *Amar Chitra Katha* to be released. The title garnered a huge popularity among the Indian audience which found its appeal in the transcendental image of the character and warrior-like masculinity presented in the book. However, the selectively presented ideas propagated by the books can be interpreted in a manner that might present a distorted idea of masculinity. The titles ignored the queerness of Krishna's character as portrayed in the books that the works are based on. This section would attempt to analyze the titles of *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* and *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* thoroughly and explore how every aspect of it, i.e., the language,

narrative, and illustrations, is manipulated, distorted, or omitted in order to provide a heteronormative and heterosexual narrative.

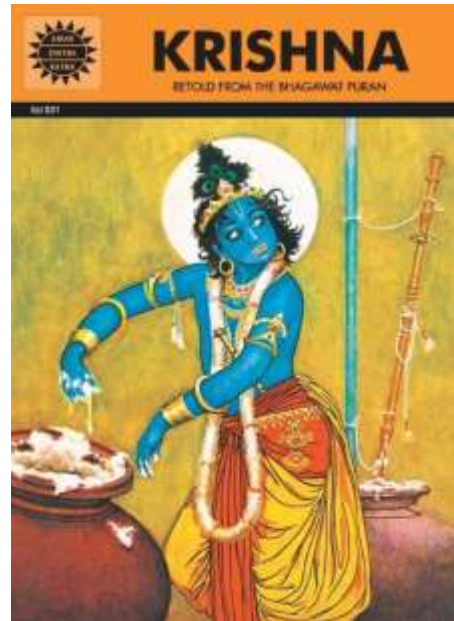


Fig. 1.1. Title page of *Krishna-Retold from the Bhagawat Puran*

The title page of *Krishna-Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* (Fig. 1.1) depicts the titular character as a bejeweled child stealing butter from a pot. The character has a halo around his head, thus establishing his holiness and purity. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, the child Krishna, being the son of a humble cowherd, is adorned with flowers, garlands, and red *kumkuma* (a red powder used for religious markings) on his hands and feet, more than jewelry. Depicting Krishna with more jewelry takes his image away from being portrayed with the femininity of flowers to being portrayed as an affluent child (since it was acceptable for men too to wear jewelry during that time) which is unlike his original image (Vanamali, 2000, 58).

“...they remembered how Krsna dressed decorated with a peacock feather on his head, just like a dancing actor, and with blue flowers pushed over his ear. His garment glowed yellow-gold and he was garlanded with a Vaijayanti necklace...they held new twigs of mango tree, peacock feathers and bunches of flowers in their hands, dressed in garlands of flowers...” (*The Gopis Attracted by The Flute, Canto Ten, Srimad Bhagavatam*, Subramaniam, 178).

“...He was seen nicely decorated with *tilaka* on his face. He was garlanded with different kinds of forest flowers, and his body was smeared with the pulp of

sandalwood and *tulasi* leaves...” (*The Gopis Feeling of Separation, Canto Ten, Srimad Bhagavatam*, Subramaniam, 178)

Since he was a child, Krishna’s valorous acts are repeatedly highlighted in the work. Instances from his childhood that depicted his gender fluidity and feminine qualities are deliberately omitted in favor of the more masculine ones. For instance, the *Srimad Bhagavatam* refers to an episode where Krishna decided to play a prank on the *gopikas*. He stole their clothes while they bathed and refused to return them until the milkmaids show their allegiance to him. In the narrative of *Amar Chitra Katha*, Krishna teased them until they praised him immensely and then he returned their clothes. In the narrative of the Mahabharata, in order to punish him, the milkmaids decided to dress Krishna as a woman. But to their surprise, instead of being offended or ashamed, Krishna insisted on them giving him their best jewelry and painting his face. And to remind him of their love, Krishna declared that all images of him would sport a nose ring and a braid decorated with flowers and jewelry, like a woman. He would also paint his palms and soles red with *alta* (a red dye applied to the hands and feet of women), thus exhibiting signs of gender blending (Varma, 1983, 23). In the image (Fig. 1.2), the above episode is depicted where Krishna can be seen sporting with the *gopis* and refusing to return their clothes. While this episode is depicted in *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*, the scenes depicting the crossdressing and Krishna’s gender fluidity are omitted.



Fig. 1.2. Krishna plays a prank on the *gopikas*

In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, Krishna, when playing his flute, is described to be in the *tribhanga* or the tri-bent posture, and was also called *Tribhanga Murari* (Fig. 1.3). This posture is primarily considered to be a gender fluid and de-gendering posture (Craven, 1987, 70) and Krishna's stance of using this posture for his flute-playing may be considered as an ode to his gender fluidity (Prabhupada, 1970, 42). However, in neither *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* nor *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*, does Krishna adopt this pose and plays the flute in a straight and more masculine posture. The picture below (Fig. 1.4) depicts Krishna playing the flute in a straight posture as opposed to the *Tribhanga Murari* posture.



Fig. 1.3. Krishna in the *Tribhanga* posture

(image sourced from <https://hinduismstackexchange.com>) Fig. 1.4. Krishna's *tribhanga* posture missing from ACK

Even instances and depictions of Krishna dancing, in *Krishna-Retold from the Bhagawat Puran*, is immediately followed by a speech bubble exclaiming Krishna to be a wondrous boy. In the image (Fig. 1.5) Krishna is remarked to be a wonder boy after having successfully defeated the demon serpent, Kaliya. He is hailed as a wonder boy or a strong man repeatedly after every feat in the speech bubbles in order

to reinforce his identity as a masculine warrior, in spite of depicting gender fluid traits.



Fig. 1.5. Krishna is claimed to be a ‘wonder boy’

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* describes the effect of Krishna on animals. Having a soft nature and kindness towards animals, to the extent of having a hypnotic effect on them is considered to be a de-gendering trait (Thapar, 1999, 245). Krishna is often described to have a hypnotic effect, through his flute playing on cows, deers, elephants and other animals and is thus able to tame them easily.

“...My dear friends, just see the deer! Although they are dumb animals, they have approached the son of Maharaja Nanda, Krsna. Not only are they attracted by the dress of Krsna...but as soon as they hear the playing of the flute, the deer along with their husbands, offer respectful obeisances...even the cows and calves in Vrndavana knew how to cry for Krsna and embrace him heart to heart.” (*The Gopis Attracted by The Flute, Canto Ten, Srimad Bhagavatam*, Subramaniam, 531).

However, both *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* and *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* depicts instances of unruly strength and violence against animals, and not the episodes of kindness towards them, in order to portray a more masculine personality and suppress the more gender fluid aspects. In the image (Fig. 1.6) Krishna can be seen successfully defeating a mighty and unruly elephant and killing it.



Fig. 1.6. Instance of Krishna's violence against animals

The title page of *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* (Fig. 1.7), shows a muscular Krishna atop the multiple heads of Kaliya, the demon serpent. It also shows illustrations of Krishna's feats in lifting the Govardhana Mountain and fighting from his chariot in his divine form. The striking part of these depictions are that Krishna is depicted as a muscular warrior figure whereas during the occurrence of this episode, Krishna was merely a seven- or eight-years old child. Thus, from the very title page of the work, there is an attempt made to depict the character of Krishna as more masculine and warrior like. He is also missing symbols such as his flower adornments (which have been replaced by gold jewelry), his braided hair or his nose ring, that highlight the gender bending aspects in his character (Vanamali, 2000, 58).



Fig. 1.7. Title page of *Bhagwat- The Krishna Avatar*

Flute-playing, dancing or singing was a huge part of Krishna's childhood as described in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. However, instances of these activities are depicted at a bare minimum in the chapters on Krishna's childhood, namely *Krishna-Darling of Gokul* or *Krishna- Subduer of Kaliya*. The idea, in these chapters, is to put forth a fantastical, magical image of Krishna. However, the stress is repeatedly given on his accomplishments as a warrior instead of highlighting his gender fluid aspects as well (Prabhupada, 1970, 200-204). For example, in *Krishna-The Subduer of Kaliya*, (Fig. 1.8), Krishna is shown to be playing his flute for his friends, in the forest. However, in the very next panel, the boys are shown to be fighting like bulls. Not only is Krishna's *tribhanga* posture ignored in these panels, but it is a deliberate choice to include a masculine activity immediately after an activity that might be considered as gender blended or queer.



Fig. 1.8. Assertion of Krishna's masculinity

One of the most important episodes in Krishna's life, as described in the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, is the *raas-leela*. As defined in the work, the *raas-leela* is a group dance where a theatrical actor dances among many dancing girls. This episode is a testament to the queer aspects of Krishna's character as a number of concepts such as the *Krishna shringar*, (the adornment of Krishna and Radha) and the dance are highlighted in this portion (Subramaniam, 1987, 566). However, many of these concepts are missing in its adaptation in *Bhagawat-The Krishna Avatar*. Not only are the queer aspects in Krishna's character suppressed in this depiction of the *raas-leela* as depicted in Fig. 1.9., but concepts such as the *Krishna shringar* or explicit references to homoerotic behaviour are omitted completely. For instance, Krishna's *tribhanga* posture when enchanting the *gopikas* is repeatedly ignored (Prabhupada, 1970, 276).



Fig. 1.9. Amar Chitra Katha's depiction of the raas-leela

The Sanskrit word, *Shringar*, denotes beautiful, sublime emotions like love, adornment, beauty, and attraction. And being the divine embodiment of attraction, Krishna and *Shringar* are inseparable. The concept of *Krishna Shringar* celebrates the fact that male and female are not separate but are a seamless whole. This concept is even celebrated through various rituals and practices (Ambalal, 1995, 21). The *Srimad Bhagavatam* makes a reference to *Krishna Shringar* through the description of Krishna as jewelry, a description that is extremely gender fluid in itself.

“It appeared that Krsna was a greenish sapphire locket in the midst of a golden necklace decorated with valuable stones.” (*Description of the Rasa Dance, Canto Ten, Srimad Bhagavatam*, Subramaniam, 566).

One of the *shringar kridas* or plays is where Radha and Krishna exchange clothes, saying ‘I will become you and you will become me.’ Radha would risk everything to be with Krishna. She would slip out of her house in the middle of the night, make her way through the woods to the meadows of Madhuvana on the banks of the river Yamuna where Krishna would play the flute and enchant her. In her love for Krishna, she felt that he would never understand her anguish and longing until he could become her. So, to pacify Radha, Krishna decided that one night they should exchange roles. At the appointed hour, Krishna wore Radha’s clothes and Radha wore

Krishna's clothes. She played the flute and he danced around her (Prabhupada, 1970, 278-279). This episode clearly depicts signs of gender-bending. However, this entire concept is not mentioned in neither *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* or *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*.

In the chapter *Krishna: The Upholder of Govardhana* from *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*, a different side of Krishna is shown than in other titles based on Krishna. However, it lacks the many aspects, as enumerated, that makes the character of Krishna queer. The depiction of Krishna in this chapter makes him appear as a romantic but it also robs him of the many gender fluid and queer qualities that add depth and meaning to his character, thus also taking away from his original storyline.

In the chapter *Krishna- The Lord of Dwarka* from *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar*, a reference is made to Krishna's education under his guru, Sandipani. While the *Srimad Bhagavatam* describes Krishna's education very comprehensively, portraying in details all the sixty-four arts learnt by the children (Subramaniam, 1987, 612), *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* depicts through illustrations (Fig. 1.10), only the masculine ones such as yoga, weaponry, archery, fighting and so on. More gender-blended arts such as singing, dancing, decorating their faces and hair, making clothes, music, sewing, embroidery and so on are not illustrated.

“First of all, they learned how to sing, how to compose songs and how to recognize the different tunes; They learned the favorable and unfavorable accents and meters, how to sing different kinds of rhythms and melodies, and how to follow them by beating different kinds of drums. They learned how to dance with rhythm, melody and different songs. They learned how to write dramas, and they learned the various types of paintings, beginning from different village arts up to the highest perfectional stage. They also learned how to paint tilaka on the face and make different kinds of dots on the forehead and cheeks. Then They learned the art of making paintings on the floor with liquid paste of rice and flour; such paintings are very popular at auspicious ceremonies performed at household affairs or in the temple. They learned how to make a resting place with flowers and how to decorate clothing and leaves with colorful paintings. They also learned how to set valuable jewels in ornaments. They learned the art of ringing waterpots. Waterpots are filled with water to a certain measurement so that as one beats on the pots, different tunes are produced, and when

the pots are beaten together, they produce a melodious sound. They also learned how to throw water in the rivers or lakes while taking a bath among friends. They learned how to decorate with flowers. This art of decorating can still be seen in various temples of Vrndavana during the summer season. It is called phulla-badi. The dais, the throne, the walls and the ceiling are all fully decorated, and a small, aromatic fountain of flowers is fixed in the center. Because of these floral decorations, the people, fatigued from the heat of the summer, become refreshed. Krsna and Balarama learned the art of dressing hair in various styles and fixing a helmet in different positions on the head. They also learned how to set up a theatrical stage, how to decorate dramatic actors with cloth and with flower ornaments over the ear, and how to sprinkle sandalwood pulp and water to produce a nice fragrance. They also learned the art of performing magical feats. Within the magical field there is an art called bahu-rupi by which a person dresses himself in such a way that when he approaches a friend he cannot be recognized. Krsna and Balarama also learned how to make beverages required at various times, and They studied syrups and tastes and the effects of intoxication. They learned also different types of sewing and embroidery works, as well as how to manipulate thin threads for dancing puppets. They learned how to string wires on musical instruments, such as the vina, sitar, esaraj and tamboura, to produce melodious sound. Then They learned puzzles and how to set and solve them. They learned the art of reading books from which even a foolish student can very quickly learn to read the alphabet and comprehend writing. Then They learned how to rehearse and act out a drama. They also studied the art of solving crossword puzzles, filling up the missing spaces and making complete words. They also learned how to draw and read pictographic literature. In some countries in the world, pictographic literature is still current. A story is represented by pictures; for instance, a man and house are pictured to represent a man going home. Krsna and Balarama also learned the art of architecture--how to construct residential buildings. They learned to recognize valuable jewels by studying the luster and the quality of their colors. Then They learned the art of setting jewels with gold and silver. They also learned how to study soil to find minerals. This study of soil is now a greatly specialized science, but formerly it was common knowledge even for the ordinary man. They learned to study herbs and plants and to extract medicine from the elements. By studying the different species of plants, they learned how to crossbreed plants and trees and get different types of fruits. They learned how to train and engage

lambs and cocks in fighting for sport. They then learned how to teach parrots to speak and answer the questions of human beings. They learned practical psychology--how to influence another's mind and thus induce another to act according to one's own desire. Sometimes this is called hypnotism. They learned how to wash hair, dye it in different colors and curl it in different ways. They learned the art of telling what is written in someone's book without actually seeing it. They learned to tell what is contained in another's fist. Sometimes children imitate this art, although not very accurately. One child keeps something within his fist and asks his friend, "Can you tell what is within?" and the friend gives some suggestion, although he actually cannot tell. But there is an art by which one can understand and actually tell what is held within the fist. Krsna and Balarama learned how to speak and understand the languages of various countries. Not only did They learn the languages of human beings; Krsna could also speak even with animals and birds. Evidence of this is found in Vaisnava literature compiled by the Gosvamis. Then They learned how to make carriages and airplanes from flowers. It is said in the Ramayana that after defeating Ravana, Ramacandra was carried from Lanka to Bharata-varsa on a plane of flowers, called puspa-ratha. Krsna then learned the art of foretelling events by seeing signs. In a book called Khanarvacana, the various types of signs and omens are described. If when one is going out one sees someone with a bucket full of water, that is a very good sign. But if one sees someone with an empty bucket, it is not a good sign. Similarly, if one sees a cow being milked alongside its calf, it is a good sign. The result of understanding these signs is that one can foretell events, and Krsna learned the science. Krsna also learned the art of composing matrka. A matrka is a crossword section with three letters in a line; counting any three from any side, it will count nine. The matrkas are of different kinds and for different purposes. Krsna learned the art of cutting valuable stones such as diamonds, and He learned the art of questioning and answering by immediately composing poetry within His mind. He learned the science of the action and reaction of physical combinations and permutations. He learned the art of a psychiatrist, who can understand the psychic movements of another person. He learned how to satisfy one's desires. Desires are very difficult to fulfill; but if one desires something which is unreasonable and can never be fulfilled, the desire can be subdued and satisfied, and that is an art. By this art one can also subdue sex impulses when they are aroused, as they are even in brahmachari life. By this art one can make even an enemy his friend or transfer the direct action of a physical element to other

things.” (*Kṛṣṇa Recovers the Son of His Teacher, Canto Ten, Srimad Bhagavatam, Subramaniam, 888*)

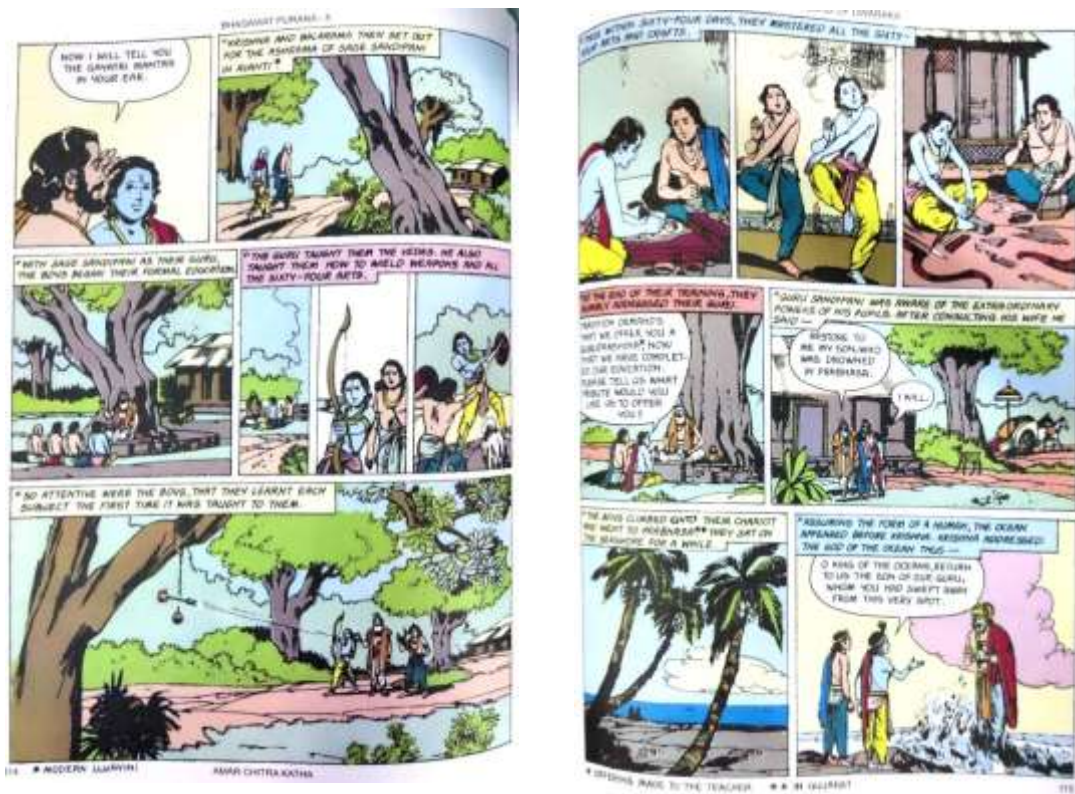


Fig. 1.10. Krishna’s education as depicted in *Amar Chitra Katha*

In addition to these traits, it may be argued that Krishna was of a polyamorous nature who preferred and kept the company of multiple women and men, and maintained a respectful and equal relationship with all of them (Vanamali, 2000, 174-183). Krishna’s polyamorous nature, though not explicitly mentioned, is shown in *Bhagawat- The Krishna Avatar* in the chapter *Krishna- The Enchanter* and *Krishna- The Victorious*. However, the manner in which they are shown is through the heterosexual and heteronormative process of marriage instead of depicting the free relationships that Krishna originally maintained (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 3).

In addition to Krishna’s romantic relationships, the narrative of Krishna remains incomplete without talking about his friendships. The *Rig Veda Samhita* (ca. 1500 BC) presents the ideal of friendship as a very sacred relation. While a man-woman relation is oriented towards the goal of procreation, a male-male or female-female relation is more creative in nature (Griffith, 1920, 484-485). The most prominent of such friendships in any of the Indian epics is Krishna’s friendship with Arjuna. The

most popular image of the two is perhaps the image from the *Bhagvad Gita* depicting Krishna and Arjuna alone together in their chariot, engaged in dialog. This friendship not only sets a precedent for the set of texts that is the *Mahabharata* but it may also be argued that their friendship may have been of a queer-platonic nature (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 3-4). The idea of platonic love is named after Plato and his writings on different types of love. Originally written in order to mock non-sexual relationships, the idea of platonic love which denotes a deep and emotional friendship that does not involve a sexual aspect, has gained a foothold in society (Chen, 2021, 118-121). The definition of queer-platonic relationships too run along those lines.

Queer-platonic relationships and queer-platonic partnerships are committed intimate relationships which are not romantic in nature. They are different from close friendships as they have more explicit commitment, status, validation, norms and structure similar to a conventional romantic relationship. They are said to sometimes even have deeper and more profound bonds than friendship (Stitt, 2020, 46-52).

The Mahabharata begins with an invocation to the two primal sages, Nara and Narayana, of whom Arjuna and Krishna are believed to be reincarnations.

“Om! Having bowed down unto Narayana, and to Nara, the foremost of men, as also to the goddess Sarasvati, should the word "Jaya" be uttered.” (*Adi Parva, Section I, Ganguli*)

In the conclusion of the First Book, Krishna asks Indra, king of the Gods, for the boon of eternal friendship with Arjuna. The story of Nara and Narayana is repeatedly recounted in the epics as Arjuna is believed to be the divine reincarnation of Nara while Krishna is the divine reincarnation of Narayana. These two sages, as recounted by Grandshire Bhishma, are believed to be living in the forest together in a state of immortal and perfect bliss. They are reincarnated to fight against unrighteousness together. Arjuna and Krishna are often called “the two Krishnas”—a name reminding of the two Ashvins in the Rig Veda (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 3). Sage Vyasa explains to Drona in an episode that Narayana is the creator of the universe who produced his equal Nara through his austerities. Thus, Krishna and Arjuna’s love for each other is justified through a connection to a shared previous eternal form. Krishna makes several declarations of his love for Arjuna, telling him:

“Vaisampayana continued, 'Having addressed Krishna thus, the illustrious Pandava, who was the soul of Krishna, became dumb, when Janardana (in reply addressed that son of Pritha) saying, 'Thou art mine and I am thine, while all that is mine is thine also! He that hateth thee hateth me as well, and he that followeth thee followeth me! O thou irrepressible one, thou art Nara and I am Narayana or Hari! We are the Rishis Nara and Narayana born in the world of men for a special purpose. O Partha, thou art from me and I am from thee! O bull of the Bharata race, no one can understand the difference that is between us!’” (*Arjunabhigamana Parva, Section XII, Ganguli*)

Although in the *Bhagavat Puran* and in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna is known for his many polyamorous and marital alliances, his role is primarily that of a ruler, a warrior, and a king. However, those roles are subordinate to his duties as a friend to the Pandavas and especially to Arjuna. In spite of being a husband to Satyabhama and Rukmini, without being a part of any extramarital alliance, his primary identity in the *Mahabharata* is that of a friend (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 4). Arjuna and Krishna are first cousins and Arjuna is married to Krishna’s sister which puts them in a close relationship with one another. But their married state become integrated into their love for one another as their friendship takes precedence over any of their marital relationships.

Krishna states, on many occasions, that Arjuna is more important to him than his wives, children, or kinsmen—there can be only one of Arjuna without whom he cannot live. For Arjuna’s sake, Krishna commits multiple acts in battle that can be called unrighteous and are still debated upon today. For instance, Krishna justifies his dishonourable act of deluding the foes by hiding the sun and then bringing it back up by professing his deep love for his friend, Arjuna.

“ I, therefore, will do that tomorrow by which Arjuna, the son of Kunti, may slay Jayadratha before the sun sets. My wives, my kinsmen, my relatives, none, amongst these is dearer to me than Arjuna. O Daruka, I shall not be able to cast my eyes, even for a single moment, on the earth bereft of Arjuna. I tell thee, the earth shall not be reft to Arjuna. Myself vanquishing them all with their steeds and elephants by putting forth my strength for the sake of Arjuna, I will slay them with Karna and Suyodhana. Let the three worlds tomorrow behold my prowess in great battle, when I put forth my

valour, O Daruka, for Dhananjaya's sake. Tomorrow thousands of kings and hundreds of princes, with their steeds and cars and elephants, will...O Daruka, fly away from battle. Thou shalt tomorrow, O Daruka, behold that army of kings overthrown and crushed with my discus, by myself in wrath for the sake of the son of Pandu. Tomorrow the (three) worlds with the gods, the Gandharvas, the Pisachas, the Snakes, and the Rakshasas, will know me as a (true) friend of Savyasachin. He that hateth him, hateth me. He that followeth him, followeth me. Thou hast intelligence. Know that Arjuna is half of myself.” (*Drona Parva, Section LXXIX, Ganguli*)

When Karna kills Ghatotkacha with the divine weapon that he had been preserving for Arjuna, Krishna is the only one who rejoices while the others mourn. He justifies his actions by professing his love for Arjuna and his relief over Arjuna being saved.

“I do not regard my sire, my mother, yourselves, my brothers, ay, my very life, so worthy of protection as Vibhatsu in battle. If there be anything more precious than the sovereignty of the three worlds, I do not, O Satwata, desire (to enjoy) it without Pritha's son.” (*Drona Parva, Section CLXXII, Ganguli*)

Their love symbolizes the love of the human self and the Divine self. Krishna, being more aware of these dimensions than Arjuna, tells him so in the Bhagavat Gita. But Krishna's human side also comes forth because of his love through the anxiety he feels whenever Arjuna is threatened.

Krishna's love for Arjuna humanizes him and he becomes an emotional human being who is vulnerable to grief and joy. Arjuna too is similarly protective of Krishna—when Karna pierces Krishna with five arrows, Arjuna in retaliation blazes such a fury of arrows that all foes except for Karna flee. The human dimension of their love is evident when, after the war is over, Krishna and Arjuna take a pleasure trip together, similar to the one they took before the war.

“Vaisampayana said, 'O lord of the earth, Vasudeva and Dhananjaya were highly pleased when the Pandavas had succeeded in regaining and pacifying their dominions, and they departed themselves with great satisfaction, like unto Indra and his consort in the celestial regions, and amidst picturesque woodland sceneries, and tablelands of mountains, and sacred places of pilgrimage, and lakes and rivers, they travelled with great pleasure like the two Aswins in the Nandana garden of Indra.’” (*Aswamedha Parva, Section XV, Ganguli*)

Before Krishna returned to his city, Dwarka on his last night at Hastinapur:

“ Permitted by the king all of them entered their respective apartments. Krishna of great energy proceeded to the apartments of Dhananjaya. Worshipped duly and furnished with every object of comfort and enjoyment, Krishna of great intelligence passed the night in happy sleep with Dhananjaya as his companion.” (*Aswamedha Parva, Section LII, Ganguli*)

Speech is crucial to relationship in the Mahabharata as it is when dialog breaks down that violence erupts and escalates. In this respect, the most important ongoing conversation in the Mahabharata is between Krishna and Arjuna. Their conversation and the apotheosis of their relationship are expressed in the Bhagavad Gita where Krishna’s thoughts unfold to Arjuna’s doubts, questions, and queries (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 6). It is interesting to note how the most important dialog and most philosophical moment in the Mahabharata is a loving conversation between two men. The Gita, thus, reiterates Krishna’s repeated declaration that he and Arjuna are one.

The image of Krishna and Arjuna can be found in many iconic images and metaphors universally. The metaphor of the inseparable bond between a chariot driver and its rider, as found in multiple Greek philosophies, is truly defined through Krishna driving Arjuna’s chariot. Krishna’s refusal to take up arms in the war while Arjuna fights may be compared to the image in the Rig Veda of the two birds sitting on the same branch, one eating while the other looks on (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 7). In spite of Krishna being a divine being, he is treated as human by Arjuna as is evident from Arjuna’s cry when Krishna reveals his true form and forgives him for any transgressions he may have committed during the course of their friendship.

“It behoveth thee, O God, to bear my faults as a father his son’s, a friend his friend’s, a lover his beloved’s.” (*Bhishma Parva, Section XXXVI, Ganguli*)

While theirs was a relationship of friendship, their deep emotional connection may also suggest otherwise. However, their relationship, if it is read as such, was merely platonic and was not of a sexual nature.

Except for *Krishna- Retold from the Bhagawat Puran* and *Bhagawat-The Krishna Avatar*, there are eight more individual titles based on Krishna. These are *Krishna and Narakasura-Confidence versus Arrogance*, *Bhanumati-Granddaughter of Krishna*,

Krishna and Shishupala-He was Forgiven a Hundred Times, Sudama-The Power of True Friendship, Krishna and the False Vaasudeva-Pride Meets Its Doom, Krishna and Jarasandha-Krishna Outsmarts His Fierce Adversary, Pradyumna-Son of Krishna, and Aniruddha-Beloved Grandson of Krishna. These titles tell individual tales of Krishna's valorous acts as described in different sections of the *Srimad Bhagavatam*. However, none of these individual titles depict the queer or the gender fluidity of Krishna. They depict only his heroic and warrior side. There is no mention of the *raas-leela*, the *krishna-shringar*, the *gopikas* or other episodes from Krishna's life that highlight his gender fluidity. Instead, Krishna's masculinity is repeatedly asserted in these individual titles, in order to portray him as a valiant and holy warrior. The only work in which these episodes are featured, albeit manipulatively, is *Bhagawat-The Krishna Avatar*, a special issue work that is not as advertised or as easily available as the rest of the individual titles. Thus, the episodes of gender fluidity in Krishna's life remains either manipulated or omitted completely from children's literature like the *Amar Chitra Katha*, which robs the readers not only of greater knowledge about a beloved Indian character but also hinders the acceptance of queer concepts and traits among young readers in Indian society.

II. Shikhandi/Shikhandini:

The story of Shikhandi begins in the *Adi Parva* as Amba, the eldest daughter of Kashya, king of Kashi and the sister of Ambika and Ambalika. Her story began at her *swayamvara* (a type of Hindu wedding where a woman chooses her husband from a group of suitors), where she and her sisters were to choose their suitors for marriage. Kings from far and near attended the *swayamvara* in the hopes of winning the princess' hands. However, the ceremony was interrupted with the coming of Bhishma who wished to disrupt the event and carry away the princesses for his step-brother Vichitravirya. He challenged the suitors present to stop him but knowing the might of Bhishma, most of them did not. Some of the kings followed Bhishma's chariot as he drove away but were soon defeated. However, the king of Salwa, Salva, who was secretly in love with Amba, and vice versa, followed Bhishma's chariot and challenged him to a duel. Unaware of their love, Bhishma easily defeated Salva but spared his life. When they reached Hastinapur, Amba confided in Bhishma and the gathered courtiers of her love for Salva and her plan to choose him during her *swayamvara*. Bhishma conceded that she should make her own decision regarding the

matter and sent her to Salva with honours, while Ambika and Ambalika were married to Vichitravirya.

In the *Ambopakhyanaparvan* chapter of the book *Udyoga Parva* of the Mahabharata, the rest of Amba's tale is narrated by Bhishma when Duryodhana questions him as to why he did not kill Shikhandi, an ally of the Pandavas, the cousins and foes of the Kauravas.

After Bhishma sends Amba with due respect to Salva's kingdom, Salva refuses to accept her as she was kidnapped to be wedded to another person. He claimed that she was rightfully won by Bhishma who had defeated him in battle and also accused her of leaving him of her own free will. In spite of her many pleadings, Salva reiterated his *Kshatriya dharma* and refused to accept her. Heartbroken, Amba left the kingdom and went back to Hastinapur. There, she accosted Bhishma and narrated her plight. Bhishma pleaded with Vichitravirya to accept her but he refused citing that she had already accepted another man as her husband. Helpless, Amba then turned to Bhishma and asked him to marry her. Bhishma refused citing his terrible vow of celibacy. This infuriated Amba who then went to several kings to ask for help in defeating Bhishma. However, knowing the might of Bhishma, all of them refused. Angry and rejected, Amba retired to the forest to gain revenge on Bhishma.

Amba reflected on her plight and considered all the people responsible for it, including herself (as she did not escape Bhishma's chariot when Bhishma was fighting Salva), Bhishma (who abducted her), Salva (who rejected her) and her father (who arranged her *swayamvara*). She finally arrived at the conclusion that Bhishma was the main culprit and swore to destroy him by austerities or battle. She sought shelter with a group of ascetics that night and narrated her tale to them. There the learned sage Shaikhavatyā consoled Amba and promised to guide her in her austerities.

Other sages discussed amongst themselves Amba's situation and contemplated her alternatives. They advised her to return to her father as there are only two true protectors of a woman: a father and a husband. However, Amba declined, deciding to practice austerities. The next day, sage Hotravahana (of the Srinjaya race), a former king and Amba's maternal grandfather, passed by the place. Upon listening to Amba's woe, the sage advised her not to return to her father and instead approach the sage Parashurama. Akritavrana, one of Parashurama's disciples, also arrived at the

place. Hotravahana introduced Amba to Akritavrana and both of them explained Amba's ordeal to him. Akritavrana gave Amba two options: either Parashurama should approach Salva to marry her or Bhishma should be defeated by Parashurama. Amba asked Akritavrana to decide who was her culprit. Akritavrana agreed with Amba that Bhishma was the root cause of her plight and should be the target of her revenge. Akritavrana and Hotravahana explained Amba's predicament to Parashurama, whom Amba herself prayed to for help. Parashurama gave his word to Amba that he would slay Bhishma, who was his disciple in the past, and destroy his pride.

When Parashurama arrived with his retinue at Kurukshetra and sent a message to Bhishma of his arrival, Bhishma came to see his guru, offering him the traditional respects. A pleased Parashurama commanded Bhishma to accept Amba. Bhishma refused, restating that he had taken a vow of celibacy. An infuriated Parashurama threatened Bhishma with death. Bhishma tried to calm the sage, but in vain, and he finally agreed to battle his guru to safeguard his Kshatriya duty. Ganga tried stopping the battle by beseeching her son as well as the great sage, but failed. The great battle lasted for twenty-three days, without any result. On the twenty-fourth day when Bhishma chose to use a deadly weapon, at the behest of the divine sage Narada and the gods, Parashurama ended the conflict and the battle was declared a tie. Parashurama narrated the events to Amba and told her to seek Bhishma's protection. However, Amba refused to listen to Parashurama's advice and left angrily declaring that she would achieve her objective by asceticism.

Amba gave up food and sleep, and practiced asceticism standing still for six months in the Yamuna River valley, surviving only on air. After that, she stood in the waters of the Yamuna, without food and practised austerities. After that, she spent time standing on her tip toes, having eaten only one fallen leaf of a tree. Her penance for twelve years started burning the heavens and the earth. She then went to Vatsa kingdom, in which many renowned sages lived. She roamed the kingdom, bathing in the sacred waters of the Ganga and the Yamuna. During her journey, she observed difficult vows and performed ablutions in the holy waters.

The goddess Ganga appeared before Amba and listened to her tale that her austerities were aimed to destroy Bhishma, Ganga's son. The angry Ganga replied that since

Amba's mind was crooked, she would become a crooked and tortuous river, which will remain dry for eight months and flow in the four months of the rainy season. Ganga declared that the bathing places along the river's course would be in difficult terrain, and it will be infested with crocodiles and other fierce creatures. Amba wandered practising severe vows and forgoing food and water for months. She visited many tirthas in this time and finally returned to Vatsa, where Ganga's curse materialized. Though half of her became the river Amba, the other half remained human, due to her ascetic merit.

The ascetics of Vatsa dissuaded her from the austerities, but Amba maintained her resolve and told them her desire was to slay Bhishma to avenge her misery. Amba performed austerities and pleased Kartikeya, the god of war and Shiva's son. He granted her a garland of ever-fresh lotuses and declared that whoever wore it will destroy Bhishma. With this garland, Amba made one more attempt to seek help of many kings and princes to support her in her just cause. However, none of them wanted to help her as they did not want to displease Bhishma. In a final effort when she approached Drupada and even he declined, in frustration she cast the garland off on a pillar outside Drupada's palace and went for austerities in the forest again. After many days, Shiva appeared to her and blessed her that she would be born as a woman who would become a man in her next birth and destroy Bhishma. Amba would remember her previous birth and hatred of Bhishma. Pleased with the boon, Amba created a funeral pyre of wood on the banks of the Yamuna and sacrificed herself (Mohammed, 2018, 155).

The story of Amba is missing from the three-volume series of Amar Chitra Katha's *Mahabharata*. However, *Amar Chitra Katha* has released an e-book (e-comic) based on Amba's tale on Amazon (Fig. 2.1). The book has been released only on Kindle and is available for free only to Kindle Unlimited Subscribers and at a price to others.

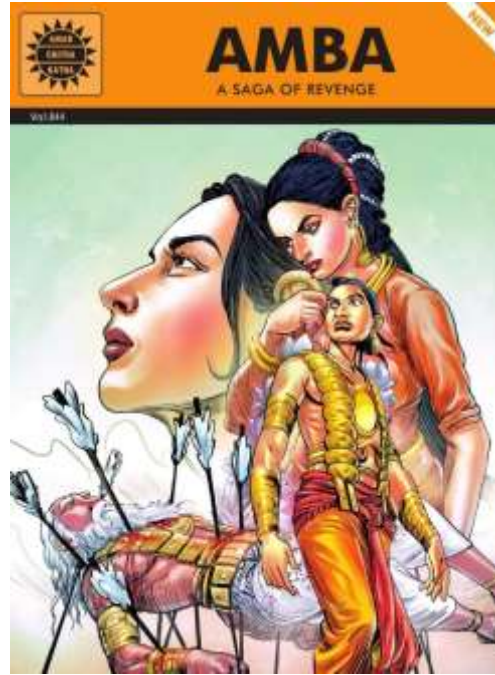


Fig. 2.1: Title page of Amar Chitra Katha's *Amba*

The story of Amba has been chronicled in the title of *Amar Chitra Katha* almost as per the Mahabharata. *Amar Chitra Katha* narrates the story of Amba till page twenty of the title, after which begins the story of Shikhandi, Amba's next birth as a woman who becomes a man to kill Bhishma. However, in the panels depicting Shiva's boon to Amba, the part of her being granted the boon of being born as a woman who would become a man is omitted (Fig. 2.2).

“How can it happen, O god, that being a woman I shall yet be able to achieve victory in battle. O lord of Uma, as a woman, my heart is quite stilled. Thou hast, however, promised me, O lord of creatures, the defeat of Bhishma. O lord, having the bull for thy mount, act in such a way that promise of thine may become true, that encountering Bhishma, the son of Santanu, in battle I may be able to slay him.' The god of gods, having the bull for his symbol, then said unto that maiden, 'The words I have uttered cannot be false. O blessed lady, true they will be. Thou shalt slay Bhishma, and even obtain manhood. Thou shalt also remember all the incidents (of this life) even when thou shalt obtain a new body. Born in the race of Drupada, thou shalt become a Maharatha. Quick in the use of weapons and a fierce warrior, thou shalt be well-skilled in battle. O blessed lady, all that I have said will be true. Thou shalt become a man at the expiration of sometime (from thy birth)!' Having said so, the god of gods, called also Kapardin, having the bull for his symbol, disappeared

then and there, in the very sight of those Brahmanas.” (*Shiva grants Amba her boon, Udyoga Parva, Ganguli*)



Fig. 2.2: Shiva grants Amba the boon of rebirth

Amba, in her next birth, was born to King Drupad of Panchala. King Drupad wanted an heir. He was given the boon that he would have a daughter who would eventually become his son. Amba was born to Drupad as Shikhandini but was raised to be his son, proficient in warfare and dressed as a warrior. Growing up, Shikhandini adopted the mannerisms and conduct of a man, depicting gender-bending traits. One day while walking in the palace gardens she sees the garland of ever-fresh lotuses that was gifted to Amba and was destined for the destroyer of Bhishma. Immediately, she garlands herself and destined herself to be Bhishma's destruction.

While Shikhandini in the Mahabharata is raised as a man, in *Amar Chitra Katha* she is depicted to have grown into a beautiful woman with a feminine disposition. Her entire storyline of being raised as a man and a warrior trained in warfare is eliminated (Fig. 2.3).

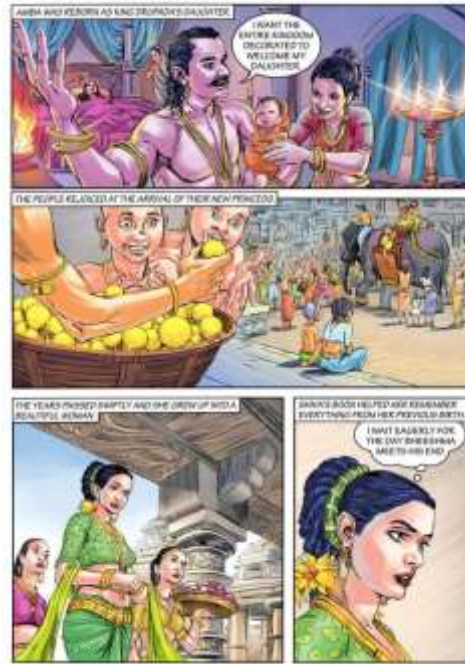


Fig. 2.3: Shikhandini is born to King Drupad

After raising Shikhandini as a son, King Drupad eventually marries her off to the princess of Dasharna. However, on their wedding night, the princess complained to her father, Hiranyavarma, that her husband was a woman. When he sent people to confirm this, Shikhandini panicked and escaped to a forest. In *Amar Chitra Katha*'s version, the story has been changed to show that Shikhandini left for the forest immediately after she garlanded herself. The part about her marriage has been eliminated completely.

Shikhandini, confronted with her femininity for the first time, escapes into the forest and meets a *yaksha* called Sthuna there. The *yaksha* listens to her story and is sympathetic towards her. He agrees to help her by letting her borrow his genitals and transform herself into a man. Shikhandini, happily agrees and leaves after successfully changing her sex. She now calls herself Shikhandi. By adopting the genitals of a man, Shikhandini undergoes gender reassignment and becomes a transsexual/intersex individual. In *Amar Chitra Katha*, words such as 'transgender', 'transsexual', or 'intersex' are eliminated completely and instead the *yaksha* is depicted to have magically 'exchanged' his gender with her and she is henceforth identified as a man. However, after Shikhandini became Shikhandi, there was still an ambiguity present in her gender. She did not magically transform into a man from a woman. The representation of this ambiguity is missing in *Amar Chitra Katha* (Fig.

2.4). Children reading the title are hence abstained from gaining an understanding of the concepts of transsexual/intersex/transgender.



Fig. 2.4: Shikhandini becomes Shikhandi

Happy with his new gender, Shikhandi goes back to Dasharna and leads a happy life, even bearing children, a son called Kshatradeva. He goes back to eventually return the genitals to the *yaksha*. The king of the *Yakshas*, Kubera, who was angry on the *yaksha* Sthuna for lending his genitals, hears Shikhandi's story and is so impressed that he allows Shikhandi to keep the genitals until his death, upon which it shall be returned again to the *yaksha*. Shikhandi returns to Panchala soon after at the brew of war and starts training to be a part of the war as a man. The story of the *yaksha* and of Shikhandi's marriage and children is eliminated from *Amar Chitra Katha* completely. Thus, a major part of Shikhandi's life remains unknown to the readers.

“Shikhandi's son Kshatradeva, that foremost of warriors, possessed of great bravery, hath, O king, been slain by thy grandson Lakshmana, O sire!” (*Sanjaya narrates the war to Dhritarashtra, Karna Parva, Ganguli*)

When war started brewing between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, Shikhandi returned to Panchala. He joined the Panchala army as an ally of the Pandavas (Panchala was an ally of the Pandavas) and fought in the war against the Kauravas.

He followed his brother Dhristyadyumna into battle. Unable to defeat Bhishma in battle, before the ninth day of war, the Pandavas visit him and ask him how he may be defeated. Bhishma directs them that he would never raise his weapons against a woman. Krishna then directs them towards Shikhandi and Bhishma agrees. They leave to prepare for battle.

Shikhandi rides into battle on the ninth day of the war (Fig. 2.5). He faces against Bhishma who, true to his word, refused to raise his weapon against someone who was born a woman. Shikhandi, taking advantage of the situation, fired a volley of arrows at him. Arjuna, who was behind Shikhandi, joined in the attack. Bhishma was soon defeated. With Bhishma's fall, Amba and Shikhandi finally avenges their revenge. Shikhandi remains in battle and is killed by Ashwatthama on the eighteenth day of the war. Upon his death, the *yaksha*'s manhood is returned to him and Shikhandi dies as a woman.



Fig. 2.5: Shikhandi faces off against Bhishma

It is interesting to note that while it is Shikhandi who plays the pivotal role in the plot of the epic by bringing about the fall of Bhishma, the title of the book is Amba, and not Shikhandi. It may be questioned whether this is a deliberate attempt to not give a central importance to a queer character in the epic. Shikhandi transitions from transgender to transsexual in the epic. However, instead of portraying him as a

transgender/transsexual, *Amar Chitra Katha* seeks to portray him as a binary of either a man or a woman. A major part of Shikhandi's narrative is missing in *Amar Chitra Katha*'s portrayal. Thus, *Amar Chitra Katha* portrays a patriarchal bias even in an attempt to be in the queer space.

The scene of the forest plays a very important role in the episode of the best-known sex change in ancient Indian literature which is Shikhandi's sex change. It is significant that the event of the sex change transpires in the forest with the aid of a forest-dwelling spirit or non-human being with semi-divine powers. Forests, in ancient texts, have always been the space where transformations happen. This is related to the space of the forest being outside the normative order and being the place where ascetics live and acquire their magical powers. Although Shikhandini, being human, needs to visit the forest to undergo her sex change, the Gods already possessing the power of metamorphosis need not do that as is in the case of Vishnu's transformation into Mohini.

When a woman changes into a man, she generally wishes to remain a man. Although Bhishma refuses to accept Shikhandi as a man, Shikhandi has all the attributes of a man—he has children with his wife, he is an acclaimed warrior, and so on. It is interesting that in Hindu texts, women are rarely reborn as men. They are reborn as more virtuous women, even women ascetics. It appears easier to cross lines of caste, class, and species than to cross the line of gender via rebirth. In spite of the boon that she receives, Amba is reborn as a woman Shikhandini and has to be changed to become a man (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 17-18).

When a man changes into a woman, the change is much less permanent, it is more ambiguous. Thus, Vishnu when he changes into Mohini still remains 'Hari'—'Hari' and 'Hara' (Vishnu and Shiva) being the parents of Ayyappa. When Arjuna is cursed to transform into a woman, he retains his manly mannerisms—he appears to be more of a hermaphrodite or a eunuch instead of a woman.

This title portrays one of the key turning points in the battle of Kurukshetra as it is only after the fall of Bhishma that the war started to turn. Shikhandi plays a huge role in bringing about the turn of events. However, a title dedicated to Shikhandi, a queer character, is available only online and to select readers. This restricts the education of various queer concepts from the readers especially children. Drupad's children

portray the entire spectrum of sexuality. Dhristadyumna is the complete man, Draupadi is the complete woman and Shikhandi is neither man nor woman. *Amar Chitra Katha* portrays Dhristadyumna (in the title *Drona*) and Draupadi as mainstream titles. However, it may be questioned why Shikhandi's portrayal is camouflaged as a limited available title under the name 'Amba'.

III. Brihannala:

Amar Chitra Katha's title *The Pandavas in Hiding- Outwiting a Wily Enemy* revolves around the thirteenth year of exile for the Pandavas and follows it towards the end of their exile. One of the most prominent characters in the title is the character of Brihannala, the eunuch form of Arjuna. Although *Amar Chitra Katha* does not provide any backstory for Brihannala, it is crucial to understand Brihannala's story as it provides the distinction between transforming into a eunuch as Arjuna was and crossdressing as one as *Amar Chitra Katha* tries to portray in its narrative.

When Arjuna was in Indraloka during their exile, he gained all the celestial weapons from Indra. After that Indra asked him to learn music and dance which he learned from Chitrasena, a *Gandharva*. One day Indra asked Chitrasena to send Urvashi to the palace of Arjuna to teach him. Hearing the virtues of Arjuna, Urvashi was filled with desire. At twilight, she reached Arjuna's residence. As soon as Arjuna saw the *apsara* at night in his chamber adorned in beautiful attire, he saluted her with closed eyes, out of respect and shyness. Urvashi confided in Arjuna of her heart's desires but he refused her advances and told her that he regards her as a motherly figure because of her marriage to his ancestor, Pururavas. She tried reasoning with him saying that as an *apsara* she is beyond worldly relations but in vain. Scorned and enraged, she cursed Arjuna to lose his manhood and live as a eunuch.

"Arjuna replied, 'O beautiful lady of features perfectly faultless, listen. I truly tell thee. Let the four directions and the transverse directions, let also the gods listen. O sinless one, as Kunti, or Madri, or Sachi, is to me, so art thou, the parent of my race, an object of reverence to me. Return, O thou of the fairest complexion: I bend my head unto thee, and prostrate myself at thy feet. Thou deservest my worship as my own mother; and it behoveth thee to protect me as a son.'"

Vaisampayana continued, "Thus addressed by Partha, Urvashi was deprived of her senses by wrath. Trembling with rage, and contracting her brows, she cursed Arjuna,

saying, 'Since thou disregardest a woman come to thy mansion at the command of thy father and of her own motion--a woman, besides, who is pierced by the shafts of Kama, therefore, O Partha, thou shalt have to pass thy time among females unregarded, and as a dancer, and destitute of manhood and scorned as a eunuch.'" (*Urvasi curses Arjuna, Vana Parva: Indralokagamana Parva, Ganguli*)

Although grieved, Arjuna accepted the curse and told Indra about it who informed him that while a curse cannot be taken back, it can be modified. Arjuna shall be transformed into a eunuch for a year during the last year of his exile and thus, will be able to live in hiding perfectly during that time.

"And Harivahana, calling his son unto himself in private, and consoling him in sweet words, smilingly said, 'O thou best of beings, having obtained thee, O child, Pritha hath to-day become a truly blessed mother. O mighty-armed one, thou hast now vanquished even Rishis by the patience and self-control. But, O giver of proper respect, the curse that Urvasi hath denounced on thee will be to thy benefit.

O child, and stand thee in good stead. O sinless one, ye will have on earth to pass the thirteenth year (of your exile), unknown to all. It is then that thou shalt suffer the curse of Urvasi. And having passed one year as a dancer without manhood, thou shalt regain thy power on the expiration of the term.'" (*Indra consoles Arjuna, Vana Parva: Indralokagamana Parva, Ganguli*)

The story in *Amar Chitra Katha's The Pandavas in Hiding* begins with the Pandavas already in hiding at Virata and Duryodhana's quest to search for them. Upon suspecting about their whereabouts, Duryodhana decides to attack Virata to draw them out of their hiding before the last year of their exile expires and they would have to go into exile again for twelve more years.

Brihannala is introduced as the dance teacher of princess Uttaraa and is depicted to be practicing dance with the princess and her companions. It is interesting to note that *Amar Chitra Katha* tends to avoid using any pronouns 'he/she/they/ for Brihannala and uses the word 'Brihannala' every time they are to be addressed. The title also avoids calling them a eunuch and keeps referring to them as a dancer/charioteer. *Amar Chitra Katha's* three volume series 'Mahabharata' does refer to Brihannala as a eunuch once but portrays it as Arjuna crossdressing as a eunuch instead of being transformed as one (Stitt, 2020, 62). *Amar Chitra Katha's* three volume series

‘Mahabharata’ is also a limited edition, comparatively expensive set and hence, the act of Arjuna addressing himself as a eunuch remains unknown to the readers (Fig. 3.1).



Fig. 3.1: Arjuna ‘plans’ to be Brihannala

Soon the kingdom of Virata is attacked by the Kauravas and Brihannala volunteers to be the charioteer for the prince Uttara to ride into battle. However, as the prince Uttara gets closer to the resplendent chariots of the Kauravas on the battlefield, he panics and runs away with Brihannala close at his heels. While Brihannala’s bravery is credited, albeit mockingly, the speech in the panels also mock them for being a eunuch and “a dancer as a charioteer”. There is no mention of such mocking in the Mahabharata (Fig. 3.2).

"Uttara said, 'Let the Kurus rob the Matsyas off all their wealth. Let men and women, O Vrihannala, laugh at me. Let my kine perish, let the city be a desert. Let me stand exposed before my father. Still there is no need of battle.'

"Vaisampayana continued, 'Saying this, that much affrighted prince decked in ear-ring jumped down from his car, and throwing down his bow and arrows began to flee, sacrificing honour and pride. Vrihannala, however, exclaimed, 'This is not the practice

of the brave, this flight of a Kshatriya from the field of battle. Even death in battle is better than flight from fear.' Having said this, Dhananjaya, the son of Kunti, coming down from that excellent car ran after that prince thus running away, his own long braid and pure red garments fluttering in the air. And some soldiers, not knowing that it was Arjuna who was thus running with his braid fluttering in the air, burst out into laughter at the sight. And beholding him thus running, the Kurus began to argue, 'Who is this person, thus disguised like fire concealed in ashes?

He is partly a man and partly a woman. Although bearing a neuter form, he yet resembleth Arjuna. His are the same head and neck, and his are the same arms like unto a couple of maces. And this one's gait also is like unto his. He can be none else than Dhananjaya. As Indra is among the celestials, so Dhananjaya is among men. Who else in this world than Dhananjaya, would alone come against us? Virata left a single son of his in the empty city. He hath come out from childishness and not from true heroism. It is Uttara who must have come out of the city, having, without doubt, made as a charioteer Arjuna, the son of Pritha, now living in disguise. It seems that he is now flying away in panic at sight of our army. And without doubt Dhananjaya runneth after him to bring him back.' (*Brihannala runs after Uttara, Virata Parva, Ganguli*)



Fig. 3.2: Brihannala mocked by the Kauravas

By refusing to credit Brihannala by referring to them as a eunuch, *Amar Chitra Katha* shows the superiority of Arjuna in his masculine form rather than his eunuch-transvestite form (Fig. 3.3). Brihannala’s bravery is mocked at in the title but when Arjuna appears in his masculine form, he is feared and revered by the Kauravas.



Fig. 3.3: Arjuna storms onto the battlefield in his masculine form

Brihannala/Arjuna is triumphant in the ensuing battle and returns to the palace. When the news of their victory reaches the palace, the king is jubilant about the victory of his son over the Kauravas. However, Kanka, a courtier who is Yudishthira in disguise, keeps crediting Brihannala for the victory. Upset over having someone else being credited for his son’s victory, the king slaps Kanka. The young prince later arrives at the palace and eventually tells the truth to his father, proving Kanka right. The king asks Kanka for forgiveness who reveals himself to be Yudishthira and his brothers too. They then leave Virata happily.

The word used in the Mahabharata for Brihannala is ‘kliba’ or eunuch. In *Amar Chitra Katha*, instead of using the term ‘eunuch’, Brihannala is described as an “effeminate charioteer”. In the Mahabharata, Kanka was slapped for insinuating that the prince has not won the battle but his charioteer did. However, in *Amar Chitra*

Katha, due to the use of the word “effeminate”, it seems to imply that Kanka was slapped for insinuating that a eunuch has won the battle over the prince.

Brihannala is an important character in the epic as it introduces femininity in one of the most masculine characters of the epic, Arjuna, rendering his gender to be but a performance (Butler, 2007, 9). It gives space for a narrative about eunuchs and cross-dressing. Cross-dressing would be a form of gender bending because the purpose is to "play with gender" roles and presentation. Androgyny is not specifically gender bending, but it can be considered as such if someone is being androgynous on purpose. Androgyny as a form of gender expression may present as a blended unification of masculine and feminine traits, with the goal of making one's sex indiscernible, or as a dichotomous mix juxtaposing male and female phenotypes, with the goal of transgressing gender norms (Devor, 1989, 53).

Amar Chitra Katha, however, looks down upon the narrative and even mocks it in parts. It refuses to even acknowledge Brihannala as a eunuch, addressing them without a pronoun and repeatedly using only their name. It also showed that Brihannala, once transformed into Arjuna is a brave and formidable warrior whereas as Brihannala, they are mockable and helpless. Hence, *Amar Chitra Katha*'s portrayal of Brihannala is extremely problematic.

IV. Mohini:

Mohini, meaning ‘the enchantress’, is a female avatar of Vishnu. The name Mohini means "to delude, enchant, perplex, or illusion" (Monier, 1899). Mohini's weapon is Maya (illusion). In Indian classical mythology she is known to have enchanted and tricked demons to save the humanity and Divinity alike. With her enchanting beauty as a weapon, she brought an end to the demon Bhasmasur who acquired boon from God Shiva to burn everything with mere touch of his palm. Mohini seduced him to dance and made him burn himself. Vishnu takes the form of Mohini to accomplish tasks that he could not have accomplished in his original male form. Mohini is also believed to be a female disguise of Krishna. Being a female avatar of Vishnu and Krishna, Mohini is also worshipped among the transgender and eunuch in many states of India (Studies, American Institute of Indian, n.d.).

She is mentioned in *Agni Purana*, *Shiva Purana*, *Brahmanda Purana*, and *Ganesh Purana*. All these texts refer to the encounter of Mohini and Shiva. Ayyappan and

Harihara are believed to be born of fallen seeds of Shiva enamoured by Mohini (Studies, American Institute of Indian, n.d.).

Amar Chitra Katha does not provide a backstory for Mohini or explain the narrative of Mohini completely during the churning of the ocean, even though it formed a key aspect of the narrative.

The cover page of *Amar Chitra Katha*'s '*The Churning of the Ocean*' depicts a bejewelled woman carrying a jar of *amrit* (nectar of immortality) across the ocean (Fig. 4.1). She is followed by an enchanted group of *asuras* (power-seeking demons) while a group of *devas* (a celestial being or god) stand watching by. This woman is Vishnu in his Mohini avatar. The image depicted is that of a cis-het woman rather than of a transsexual woman (as Mohini was). The image could have been depicted as half-man half-woman in order to show the fluidity in gender also.

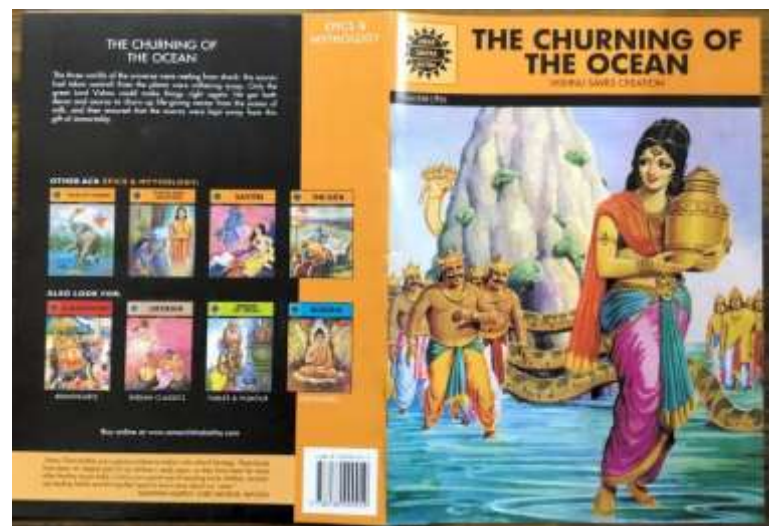


Fig. 4.1: Title page of *Amar Chitra Katha*'s '*The Churning of the Ocean*'

Similarly, Mohini's first appearance in the narrative of the title, is as a woman not a transsexual (Fig. 4.2). In the Mahabharata, Vishnu is said to be turned into an "enchantress" not a woman. Mohini, in the speech used in *Amar Chitra Katha*, calls herself a woman explicitly. Also, Vishnu's transformation into Mohini is not depicted in the title either.



Fig. 4.2: Mohini's first appearance in *Amar Chitra Katha*

When the churning of the ocean has been completed and the *devas* are partaking of the *amrit*, Rahu, an *asura* tried to disguise himself as a *deva* and have the *amrit*. In the Mahabharata, Mohini sees this and calls for her *sudarshan chakra* (a divine weapon that appears as a spinning disc with a hole in the middle) which then swiftly beheads Rahu. After beheading Rahu, Mohini transforms back into Vishnu. However, instead of depicting Mohini wielding the *sudarshan chakra* as the Mahabharata depicts it, which would have given more power to her presentation, or showing Mohini and Vishnu as two halves of the same person, *Amar Chitra Katha* shows that Vishnu has to leave his Mohini avatar completely in order to wield the *sudarshan chakra* (Fig. 4.3). This takes away from the representation given to the character of Mohini as a transgender/transsexual.

"Sauti said, 'Then the Daityas and the Danauas equipped with first-class armours and various weapons attacked the gods. In the meantime, the valiant Lord Vishnu in the form of an enchantress accompanied by Nara deceived the mighty Danavas and took away the Amrita from their hands.'"

"And all the gods at that time of great fright drank the Amrita with delight, receiving it from Vishnu. And while the gods were partaking of it, after which they had so much hankered, a Danava named Rahu was also drinking it among them in the guise of a god. And when the Amrita had reached Rahu's throat only, Surya and Soma (recognised him and) intimated the fact to the gods. And Narayana instantly cut off

with his discus the well-adorned head of the Danava who was drinking the Amrita without permission. And the huge head of the Danava, cut off by the discus and resembling a mountain peak, then rose up to the sky and began to utter dreadful cries. And the Danava's headless trunk, falling upon the ground and rolling thereon, made the Earth tremble with her mountains, forests and islands. And from that time there is a long-standing quarrel between Rahu's head and Surya and Soma. And to this day it swalloweth Surya and Soma (during solar and lunar eclipses).”

"Then Narayana quitting his enchanting female form and hurling many terrible weapons at the Danavas, made them tremble. And thus on the shores of the salt-water sea, commenced the dreadful battle of the gods and the Asuras. And sharp-pointed javelins and lances and various weapons by thousands began to be discharged on all sides. (*Mohini kills Rahu, Adi Parva, Ganguli*)



Fig. 4.3: Vishnu kills Rahu in *Amar Chitra Katha*

The narrative of Mohini ends with the beheading of Rahu in *Amar Chitra Katha*. No reference is given to the events afterwards, which led to the coupling of Vishnu and Shiva that led to the birth of Lord Ayappan. In a southern version of the *Bhagavat Purana*, it is believed that after Mohini deceives the *asuras*, Shiva sees her. He becomes so overcome by *Kama* that he pursues her while his wife looks on in shame. Shiva's seeds fall to the ground creating ores of silver and gold, and Mohini becomes a half of his *Ardhanareshwar* form.

“After Visnu had once deceived the demons by his maya female form, Siva desired to behold that ravishing form of Visnu for a second time. When the other agrees, Siva loses his head and runs after the woman while his own wife, Uma, looks on. He is subjugated by Kama. His seed falls on the ground while he runs after her, and lo * on all these places there originated holy places of silver and gold. Visnu, however, is pleased and says “What man will free himself of attachment beside Thee and cross My maya which creates manifold emotions, being difficult to overcome by those who have not subdued themselves. This maya, which consists of the gunas, will not subject Thee”, and Visnu promises that the Maya will become the female half of Siva in his manifestation of Ardhanaresvara” (Goudriaan, 1978, 42-43)

While the episode, in full, will not be possible to be addressed in children’s literature, a reference to their union or to the nature of birth of Lord Ayyappan would have given representation to the community (he was born from the thighs of Vishnu as a result of this union. He was born from the thighs as Mohini, being a transsexual, did not possess a womb, thus making him born of two fathers. (Ramaswamy, 2001, 323). Lord Ayyappan’s birth is also not mentioned in *Amar Chitra Katha*’s title ‘*Ayyappan*’ (Fig. 4.4). There is only a passing reference made to his birth, which is made to look like a heterosexual act where Mohini is portrayed as a woman and not a transsexual.

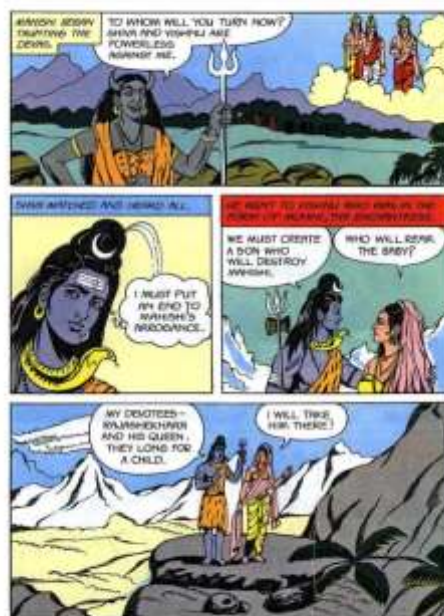


Fig. 4.4: Lord Ayyappan is born

It may be questioned whether the act of union between Vishnu and Shiva was homosexual in nature. The queer nature of Lord Ayyappan's birth and his subsequent naming as *Ayoni Jata* (born of a non-vagina) and *HariHaraPutra* (the son of Hari-Vishnu and Hara- Shiva) appears to imply at a homosexual union of his parents. This union was, however, highly revered instead of looked down upon (*Goudriaan*, 1978, 41-49).

The character of Mohini is also mentioned in the story of Aravan, the son of Arjuna and Uloopi. In the heat of the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, both the sides appeared to be evenly matched. Following the sacrifice of a white elephant by the Kauravas, the oracles on the Pandavas side decreed that the only way to win the war was to appease the gods of war by a human sacrifice. Three men were chosen for the human sacrifice—Krishna, Arjuna and Aravan. Since Krishna and Arjuna were indispensable in the outcome of the war, it was decided that Aravan shall be sacrificed. However, Aravan had a condition—he wanted to be wed before he died. But no woman was ready to marry a man who would die the day after the wedding. Krishna then adopted his Mohini avatar and agreed to marry Aravan. They were wed and the next day, Aravan was sacrificed to the gods. It is believed that no woman wept as Mohini did for Aravan (*Hiltebeitel*, 1988, 317-332).

In spite of having such a major role to play in the outcome of the war of Kurukshetra, Aravan and Mohini's story is not mentioned in the title *Uloopi*, in the anthology *Sons of the Pandavas* or in the three-volume series *Mahabharata*. His story has been eliminated completely.

Transgenders in Tamil Nadu celebrate the marriage of Aravan. These communities who call themselves as *Aravanis*, dress as Mohini in bridal makeup and lament the death of Aravan as widows, thus emphasizing their queerness.

V. Chitrangada:

While all the wives of Arjuna have titles dedicated to themselves such as Draupadi, Uloopi and Subhadra, Chitrangada does not have any such title. She is mentioned in as a passing reference in the title *Uloopi- The Naga Princess Who Fell in Love With Arjuna*, but since the title has Uloopi as the protagonist, Chitrangada's story is left untold. In *Uloopi- The Naga Princess Who Fell in Love with Arjuna*, Chitrangada's story is restricted to having met Arjuna, married him and bore him a child. The story

is focused predominantly on Arjuna and Chitrangada's son Babhruvahana. Chitrangada remains in the background. However, in the narrative of the folklore of the Mahabharata, she maintains a predominant focus.

In the title *Uloopi- The Naga Princess Who Fell in Love With Arjuna*, Arjuna confuses Chitrangada for Uloopi (Fig. 5.1). Chitrangada is dressed in a woman's attire and she introduces herself as the princess. This introduction is starkly different from Chitrangada's introduction in the folklore of the Mahabharata where she is introduced in men's attire, having captured Arjuna as a trespasser in Manipur (Tagore, 1913, 2).

“Chitra:

I am Chitra, the daughter of the kingly house of Manipur. With godlike grace Lord Shiva promised to my royal grandsire an unbroken line of male descent. Nevertheless, the divine word proved powerless to change the spark of life in my mother's womb -- so invincible was my nature, woman though I be.

Madana:

I know, that is why thy father brings thee up as his son. He has taught thee the use of the bow and all the duties of a king.

Chitra:

Yes, that is why I am dressed in man's attire and have left the seclusion of a woman's chamber. I know no feminine wiles for winning hearts. My hands are strong to bend the bow, but I have never learnt Cupid's archery, the play of eyes.

Madana:

That requires no schooling, fair one. The eye does its work untaught, and he knows how well, who is struck in the heart.”



Fig. 5.1: Introduction of Chitrangada in *Uloopi—The Naga Princess Who Fell In Love with Arjuna*

In *Amar Chitra Katha*, Arjuna expresses his desire to marry Chitrangada and asks for her hand from her father. However, in the folklore of the Mahabharata, the prerogative for proposition for marriage was in Chitrangada's hands. In a matrilineal society, like Manipur was during this time, the power to propose marriage was reserved for women. Chitrangada too expresses her love for Arjuna first. *Amar Chitra Katha's* depiction takes away this power from Chitrangada.

In the folklore of the Mahabharata, during the marriage proposition scene, Chitrangada narrates the tales of her ancestor Prabhanjana to Arjuna. She narrates that Prabhanjana, being childless, was granted a boon by Mahadeva that each of his successive descendent will always have one child and that child shall be the successor. Since, Chitravahana (Chitrangada's father) had a daughter, he raised her to be his son and the eventual king and hence her only son would succeed Manipur's throne after her (Tagore, 1913, 1). This was the reason that he asked Arjuna that his grandson must become his successor. Instead of depicting this reason, or providing a backstory that enumerates on Chitrangada's masculine qualities as a potential ruler, *Amar Chitra Katha* depicts her as extremely feminine and powerless (Fig. 5.2). This is far removed from her portrayal in the folklore of the Mahabharata.



Fig. 5.2: Chitravahana asks his grandson to be successor

After Arjuna leaves Manipur, the Mahabharata loses track of Chitrangada for several chapters. It regains her narrative after unbeknownst to Arjuna (unlike the narrative of *Amar Chitra Katha*) Babruvahana, Chitrangada's son, stops his *Ashwamedha Yagna* horse (a horse sacrifice ritual where a horse accompanied by a king's warriors is released to wander for a year and anyone stopping the horse is considered to challenge the king to a battle). A fierce battle follows where Arjuna dies and Chitrangada mourns him (Fig. 5.3). He is revived and he takes Uloopi, Babruvahana and Chitrangada to Hastinapur. Chitrangada becomes Gandhari, Arjuna's aunt's servant. She returns to Manipur after Arjuna, his brothers and Draupadi ascend to heaven. Since the protagonist of the title is Uloopi, these narratives of Chitrangada are lost.



Fig. 5.3: Chitrangada mourns Arjuna

The queer aspects of Chitrangada's character are missing in *Amar Chitra Katha's* depiction of her. When Arjuna met Chitrangada, she was in a warrior's attire and captured him for trespassing in Manipur. Due to the boon given by Mahadeva, Chitrangada was raised to be a warrior and the heir to the throne. However, when Chitrangada saw Arjuna, she began to experience the dormant facets of her femininity. But she was afraid that Arjuna would never accept her in her masculine clothes and attitude. Hence, she prayed to *Kama deva*, the god of love, to change her gender (not sex) and make her feminine and beautiful, thus depicting signs of de-gendering and gender bending. Her wish was granted and this adorned she approached Arjuna. Enamoured by her beauty, Arjuna reciprocated her feelings. They spent some happy times together. However, soon Manipur came under attack from enemy forces. Determined to protect her kingdom from these forces, Chitrangada leaves her female attire and gender and adorns her old masculine attire and attitude. She wins the war but is afraid Arjuna shall not like her in this garb. But Arjuna, who has witnessed her on the battlefield as a warrior was now even more enchanted by her and agreed to marry her immediately. Thus, they were married and beget a son, Babruvahana (Tagore, 1913, 1).

Chitrangada was a woman who was raised to be a man and who became a woman for Arjuna. She again switched genders to being a man to protect her kingdom. However, this did not affect Arjuna's emotions or her subjects' opinions about her.

Chitrangada's narrative is an astounding example of gender queerness, gender bending, and gender blending as she switches repeatedly between genders in accordance to her social circumstances (Stitt, 2020, 35-46). However, by hypersexualizing her as extremely feminine and demure, and suppressing her entire narrative, *Amar Chitra Katha* takes away her story and reduces her to being only a secondary character in another character's story. *Amar Chitra Katha* has been known to give a voice to the different folklores of the Mahabharata, as is proved by all of Arjuna's wives Uloopi, Draupadi and Subhadra having their own titles. It is only Chitrangada's story that has been left unsaid.

VI. Bhishma Pitamaha:

Bhishma, the primary commander of the Kaurava forces during the Kurukshetra war was the only character who witnessed the entirety of the Mahabharata, starting from the reign of his father, King Shantanu of the Kuru kingdom. Born to Ganga and King Shantanu, he was originally named Devavrata. He was later called Bhishma after he took the terrible oath—the vow of lifelong celibacy and of service to whomever sat on the throne of his father (the throne of Hastinapur). He took this oath so that his father, Shantanu could marry a fisherwoman Satyawati. One day when King Shantanu was walking along the banks of the river Yamuna, there wafted to him a divine fragrance. Upon looking for the source of the fragrance, he found Satyawati, a fisherman's daughter. Desiring to marry her Shantanu asked her father for her hand in marriage but he refused unless Shantanu would allow their future children instead of Devavrata to be his heir. Despondent, Shantanu returned heartbroken. He lost all interest in his kingly activities. Worried about his father, Devavrata sought for the cause and when he learnt of Satyawati he immediately left to bring her. He met Satyawati's father, who repeated his conditions to Devavrata. Devavrata promised to never stake a claim to the throne. Satyawati's father retorted that even if he does not his children might. Then, Devavrata took the terrible vow of life-long celibacy, sacrificing his title of the heir to the throne and denying himself the pleasure of conjugal love. His vow was so terrible and resounding, that it gave him immediate recognition among the gods, who showered flowers on him and he came to be known as Bhishma (Fig. 6.1).

"Vaisampayana continued, 'O king, the son of Ganga, devoted to truth, having ascertained the scruples of the chief of the fishermen, then said, moved thereto by the desire of benefiting his father, 'Chief of fishermen, thou best of men, listen to what I say in the presence of these assembled kings. Ye kings, I have already relinquished my right to the throne, I shall now settle the matter of my children. O fisherman, from this day I adopt the vow of Brahmacharya (study and meditation in celibacy). If I die sonless, I shall yet attain to regions of perennial bliss in heaven!'

"Vaisampayana continued, 'Upon these words of the son of Ganga, the hair on the fisherman's body stood on end from glee, and he replied, 'I bestow my daughter!' Immediately after, the *apsaras* and the gods with diverse tribes of Rishis began to rain down flowers from the firmament upon the head of Devavrata and exclaimed, 'This one is Bhishma (the terrible).' Bhishma then, to serve his father, addressed the illustrious damsel and said, 'O mother, ascend this chariot, and let us go unto our house.' (*Bhishma takes his oath, Adi Parva, Ganguli*)

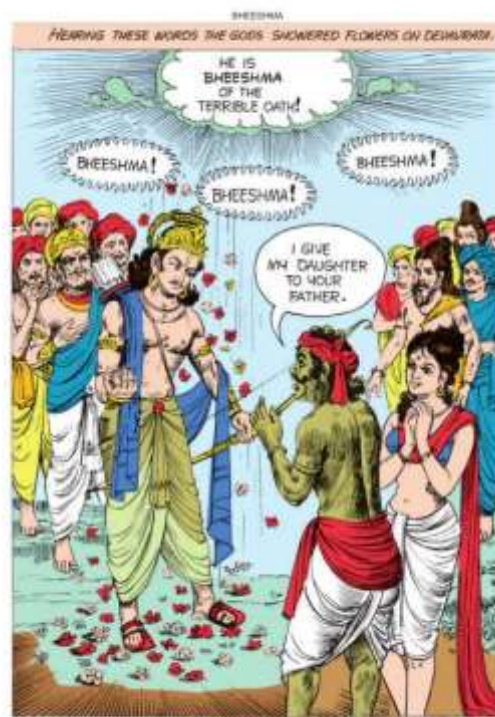


Fig. 6.1: Bhishma takes his oath

However, in order to understand Bhishma's queer orientation, it is necessary to understand asexuality. The lack of sexual attraction towards anyone is defined as asexuality. Some asexuals are completely averse to sex while others do indulge in sexual intercourse rarely or for specific reasons (Poston and Baumle, 2010, 509-530). Asexuality is often written off as impotence or can be difficult to distinguish from celibacy. In such circumstances, it is necessary to differentiate between asexuality and celibacy. In India, 'the land of the *brahmacharya*' especially, where celibacy is looked up to and the 'learned celibate or the enlightened celibate is glorified and worshipped, this distinction becomes very important. Asexuality is nature whereas celibacy is a choice through faith or otherwise. Academic literature gives more focus on asexuality in women. Asexuality in men is either not focused or written off as celibacy. Men are considered to be sexual and active whereas women are considered to be asexual and passive. So, for a man to give up his sexual life was considered to be a feat. Men adopting *brahmacharya* (life-long celibacy) was more revered and applauded (Alter, 1994, 45-66).

The circumstances of taking Bhishma's vow are hence very important to the narrative. When Bhishma took the vow, there was no reason for him to do so and it was discouraged too by everyone present. It was Bhishma who insisted on taking the vow, taking everyone by surprise, for the love of his father. Bhishma took care of King Shantanu and Satyawati's sons and brought them up as his brothers. When Shantanu dies, he takes on the responsibilities of serving his brother as heir and getting them married. He refuses to marry Amba because of his vow, driving her to insanity and eventually suicide. It may be noted that no reference is made to Amba wooing Bhishma unsuccessfully in *Amar Chitra Katha* and Bhishma's indifference towards Amba is ignored and eliminated (Fig. 6.2).



Fig. 6.2: Amba scorned by Bhishma

It is also interesting to note that similar to Bhishma, Arjuna too had taken a vow of celibacy before embarking on his twelve-year exile. However, when he met Ulupi and she threatened to kill herself if he did not reciprocate her advances, he relented and broke his vow. Amba who tried to woo him for seven years before finally committing suicide threatened Bhishma similarly. He, though, did not relent (Ganguli, 1883).

"Hearing these words of Arjuna, Ulupi answered, 'There is a Naga of the name of Kauravya, born in the line of Airavata. I am, O prince, the daughter of that Kauravya, and my name is Ulupi. O tiger among men, beholding thee descend into the stream to perform thy ablutions, I was deprived of reason by the god of desire. O sinless one, I am still unmarried. Afflicted as I am by the god of desire on account of thee, O thou of Kuru's race, gratify me today by giving thyself up to me.'

"Arjuna replied, 'Commanded by king Yudhishtira, O amiable one, I am undergoing the vow of Brahmacharin for twelve years. I am not free to act in any way I like. But, O ranger of the waters, I am still willing to do thy pleasure (if I can). I have never spoken an untruth in my life. Tell me, therefore, O Naga maid, how I may act so that, while doing thy pleasure, I may not be guilty of any untruth or breach of duty.'

"Ulupi answered, 'I know, O son of Pandu, why thou wanderest over the earth, and why thou hast been commanded to lead the life of a Brahmacharin by the superior. Even this was the understanding to which all of you had been pledged, viz., that amongst you all owning Drupada's daughter as your common wife, he who would from ignorance enter the room where one of you would be sitting with her, should lead the life of a Brahmacharin in the woods for twelve years. The exile of any one amongst you, therefore, is only for the sake of Draupadi. Thou art but observing the duty arising from that vow. Thy virtue cannot sustain any diminution (by acceding to my solicitation). Then again, O thou of large eyes, it is a duty to relieve the distressed. Thy virtue suffereth no diminution by relieving me. Oh, if (by this act), O Arjuna, thy virtue doth suffer a small diminution, thou wilt acquire great merit by saving my life. Know me for thy worshipper, O Partha! Therefore, yield thyself up to me! Even this, O lord, is the opinion of the wise (viz., that one should accept a woman that wooeth). If thou do not act in this way, know that I will destroy myself. O thou of mighty arms, earn great merit by saving my life. I seek thy shelter, O best of men! Thou protectest always, O son of Kunti, the afflicted and the masterless. I seek thy protection, weeping in sorrow. I woo thee, being filled with desire. Therefore, do what is agreeable to me. It behoveth thee to gratify my wish by yielding thy self up to me.'

"Vaisampayana said, 'Thus addressed by the daughter of the king of the Nagas, the son of Kunti did everything she desired, making virtue his motive. The mighty Arjuna, spending the night in the mansion of the Naga rose with the sun in the morning. Accompanied by Ulupi he came back from the palace of Kauravya to the region where the Ganges entereth the plains. The chaste Ulupi, taking her leave there, returned to her own abode. And, O Bharata, she granted unto Arjuna a boon making him invincible in water, saying, 'Every amphibious creature shall, without doubt, be vanquishable by thee.'" (*Uloopi woos Arjuna, Adi Parva, Ganguli*)

When his brother dies without having any heirs, Satyavati gives Bhishma permission to break his vow and impregnate the queens, Ambalika and Ambika. Bhishma, according to his vow of always serving in the interest of the throne of Hastinapur, could have agreed as the throne was without successors and in crisis. However, he refuses in spite of Satyavati's pleadings (Ganguli, 1883).

"Vaisampayana said, 'The unfortunate Satyavati then became plunged in grief on account of her son. And after performing with her daughters-in-law the funeral rites of the deceased, consoled, as best she could, her weeping daughters-in-law and Bhishma, that foremost of all wielders of weapons. And turning her eyes to religion, and to the paternal and maternal lines (of the Kurus), she addressed Bhishma and said 'The funeral cake, the achievements, and the perpetuation of the line of the virtuous and celebrated Santanu of Kuru's race, all now depend on thee. As the attainment of heaven is inseparable from good deeds, as long life is inseparable from truth and faith, so is virtue inseparable from thee. O virtuous one, thou art well-acquainted, in detail and in the abstract, with the dictates of virtue, with various Srutis, and with all the branches of the Vedas; know very well that thou art equal unto Sukra and Angiras as regards firmness in virtue, knowledge of the particular customs of families, and readiness of inventions under difficulties. Therefore, O foremost of virtuous men, relying on thee greatly, I shall appoint thee in a certain matter. Hearing me, it behoveth thee to do my bidding. O bull among men, my son and thy brother, endued with energy and dear unto thee, hath gone childless to heaven while still a boy. These wives of thy brother, the amiable daughters of the ruler of Kasi, possessing beauty and youth, have become desirous of children. Therefore, O thou of mighty arms, at my command, raise offspring on them for the perpetuation of our line. It behoveth thee to guard virtue against loss. Install thyself on the throne and rule the kingdom of the Bharatas. Wed thou duly a wife. Plunge not thy ancestors into hell.'

"Vaisampayana continued, 'Thus addressed by his mother and friends and relatives, that oppressor of foes, the virtuous Bhishma, gave this reply conformable to the dictates of virtue, 'O mother, what thou sayest is certainly sanctioned by virtue. But thou knowest what my vow is in the matter of begetting children. Thou knowest also all that transpired in connection with thy dower. O Satyavati, I repeat the pledge I once gave, viz., I would renounce three worlds, the empire of heaven, anything that may be greater than that, but truth I would never renounce. The earth may renounce its scent, water may renounce its moisture, light may renounce its attribute of exhibiting forms, air may renounce its attribute of touch, the sun may renounce his glory, fire, its heat, the moon, his cooling rays, space, its capacity of generating sound, the slayer of Vritra, his prowess, the god of justice, his impartiality; but I cannot renounce truth.' Thus addressed by her son endued with wealth of energy,

Satyavati said unto Bhishma, 'O thou whose prowess is truth, I know of thy firmness in truth. Thou canst, if so minded, create, by the help of thy energy, three worlds other than those that exist. I know what thy vow was on my account. But considering this emergency, bear thou the burden of the duty that one oweth to his ancestors. O punisher of foes, act in such a way that the lineal link may not be broken and our friends and relatives may not grieve.' Thus urged by the miserable and weeping Satyavati speaking such words inconsistent with virtue from grief at the loss of her son, Bhishma addressed her again and said, 'O Queen, turn not thy eyes away from virtue. O, destroy us not. Breach of truth by a Kshatriya is never applauded in our treatises on religion. I shall soon tell thee, O Queen, what the established Kshatriya usage is to which recourse may be had to prevent Santanu's line becoming extinct on earth. Hearing me, reflect on what should be done in consultation with learned priests and those that are acquainted with practices allowable in times of emergency and distress, forgetting not at the same time what the ordinary course of social conduct is.'" (*Bhishma refuses Satyavati, Adi Parva, Ganguli*)

In the mainstream narrative of the Mahabharata, this is depicted to be an adherence to the oath, portraying Bhishma as a man of his word. However, a case may be made that Bhishma was asexual. Bhishma does not, for once, lead a miserable life because of his vow. He leads a happy and fulfilling life and his vow does not appear to inconvenience him in any way. He was an exceptional warrior who was loved and respected by all. In fact, he was so respected that the battle of Kurukshetra stopped when he fell as everyone paid respects to his fallen body. And, in the end, he is depicted to have died happily (He was called '*Pitamaha*' out of respect despite never showing any sexual desire). Amba had tried to woo him for seven years including threatening suicide; he did not falter once. He is depicted to not have any desires in the first place instead of restraining his desires. This narrative lines up with the personal narratives of present day asexuals who find their identity liberating and successfully seek fulfilment in the other spheres of life (Poston and Baumle, 2010, 509-530).

There exists a distinction between celibacy and asexuals. Celibacy is voluntary refraining from sexual behaviour despite the existence of sexual attraction whereas asexuality is the lack of sexual attraction itself (Bauman, 2000, 5-27; Jain, 2006, 1654-1660). Bhishma, although celibate, can be read as asexual too. Born from a divine

parent and a human being, Bhishma stands at the border of divinity and humanity. The divine is considered to have a lack of sexuality as it is considered to be transcendental. Thus, it may be read that sexuality is human. Bhishma, due to his lack of sexuality, becomes the only human character with the potential to be asexual (Chakravarti, 1995, 2248-2256; Yadav, 2010, 107-112).

Although the main story in the Mahabharata celebrates filial, parental and marital love and fidelity, it also looks at marriage and parenthood in opposition to friendships. Although some stories stress on the need for marriage and procreation for the attainment of liberation, yet asceticism is presented as the highest and most powerful state through which humans attain deification. The state of happiness through asceticism is true happiness as opposed to the illusionary happiness of conjugality (Ganguli, 1883).

Asexuality, celibacy, and asceticism are all characterized by a rejection of the need for procreation. The selfless love of friends in the Mahabharata is put in contrast to the self-seeking relationship between parents and their children. The Mahabharata is hence riddled with children like Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha, or Aravan being sacrificed in the name of righteousness—that is, to serve their parents. The pathos of the children burdened by this expectation is exemplified in the life of Bhishma (Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, 8-9).

Arjuna is called a *brahmachari* because he approaches his wives only for purposes of procreation. Bhishma describes such a man who goes to their wife only for procreation as “someone who overcomes all difficulties” (*Mahabharata, Santi Parva, Rajadharmanusana Parva, Section CX*, Ganguli). In one account, Bhishma tells Yudhishtira that sex and marriage came into being only after the human race degenerated. In earlier times people lived as they chose and:

“Sexual congress, O chief of the Bharatas, was then not necessary for perpetuating the species. In those days offspring were begotten by fiat of the will. In the age that followed, viz., Treta, children were begotten by touch alone. The people of that age even, O monarch, were above the necessity of sexual congress. It was in the next age, viz., Dwapara, that the practice of sexual congress originated, O king, to prevail among men. In the Kali age, O monarch, men have come to marry and live in pairs.” (*Santi Parva, Section CCVII*, Ganguli)

He goes on to advise against attachment to children:

“As one casts off from one's body such vermin as take their birth there but as are not on that account any part of oneself, even so should one cast off those vermin of one's body that are called children, who, though regarded as one's own, are not one's own in reality. From the vital seed as from sweat (and other filth) creatures spring from the body, influenced by the acts of previous lives or in the course of nature. Therefore, one possessed of wisdom should feel no regard for them.” (*Santi Parva, Section CCVII, Ganguli*)

Comments such as Bhishma's can be read as a critique of the institutions of compulsory marriage and parenthood. It can also be read as a critique of conjugal love as he, on several occasions, rejects the idea of conjugality. While many other instances in the Mahabharata condemn the institution of parenthood (such as Dhritarashtra's blind love for his son), Bhishma's critique stands out as one of the only characters with such a noble asceticism and asexual nature.

Bhishma is a highly regarded and greatly respected character in the Mahabharata. Reading Bhishma as an asexual gives the asexual community a representation in the Hindu mythology and humanizes them. The existence of Bhishma as an asexual proves the existence of asexuals in general. The Mahabharata contains the essence of all human knowledge. While asexuals are struggling to find identity in the Indian consciousness, changing the perspective to read Bhishma as an asexual validates their existence in the Indian society.

It is believed that people inclined to alternative sexual behaviours are also expressions of divine play or *leela*. Invocations to a certain god or goddess often take the form of saying that they are everything, including all apparent opposites. Oppositions are revealed and resolved in the universality and all-ness of God. Thus Shiva, in a long monologue, is addressed as “Thou art male, thou art female, thou art neuter.” (*Santi Parva I, Apadharmanusana Parva, CCLXXXV, Ganguli*). Ancient texts too aspire to this condition, representing this all-ness and leaving nothing out. As the Mahabharata, in its concluding section, famously puts it:

“That which occurs here, occurs elsewhere. That which does not occur here, occurs nowhere.” (*Swargarohanika Parva, Section V, Ganguli*).

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