



Reimagining Sikhandi: A Gendered Analysis

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Abstract: The genre of gender studies in literature and visual media started as a means for the emancipation of women and later on it moved as a means for the portrayal of various gender diversities and sexuality too

In the greatest Hindu epic Mahabharata, King Drupada, desiring an heir, sought Lord Shiva's blessing and was told a girl would be born to him, destined to become a man. Sikhandi, raised as a boy, was to marry the daughter of King Hiranyavarman. Upon realizing Sikhandi's true gender, tensions rose, leading to the threat of war. To prove Sikhandi's manhood, a yaksha named Stunakarna helped by temporarily exchanging sexes. Sikhandi, now a man, alleviated the conflict between the kings, ensuring peace and acceptance of his identity. The book Palace of Illusion by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an adaptation of Mahabharata; the character Sikhandi is portrayed as a queer character, representing the inner feelings of someone from the trans community. Chitra Banerjee uses some metaphorical matters to convey the feeling of a person with gender diversity. This paper examines how Sikhandi is characterised with different traits in both these texts, and where does the queer aspect lie in these texts.

Index Terms – Gender diversity, Sexuality, Trans community

Sex and Gender are two terms which are substitute each other by most of the human population in our world. Sex is something which is determined with the help of sexual organs or genitals that is present in a human body. There are differences between men and women which may seem that the statement is intended to make inequality, but if we perceive into the process of evolution, we can witness that humans were being made to survive in forest areas thriving a lot of complications. So in the past i.e. when humans were the citizens of the forest, men had to have stronger muscles to hunt the animals for food and for considering their own safety, and in contrary women were supposed to give birth to healthy offspring and for that reason they evolved to have wider hips and breast to feed their children. It's important to remember that these differences don't mean that all women are meant to be caregivers or that men can't be nurturing.

“Feminism therefore distinguishes between the word sex, which refers to our biological constitution as female or male, and the word gender, which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine. In other words, women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Rather, these gender categories are constructed by society, which is why this view of gender is an example of what has come to be called social constructionism”,(Tyson 4) said Lois Tyson in her article Feminist Criticism. This statement sounds very progressive but the gender of a person isn't constructed by the society, it is innately there in the brain of a person, in fact the Gender of a person may or may not be usual i.e. it's not compelling for a man to have a masculine gender or a woman to have a feminine gender. Gender neutrality is solely promoted by Sweden across some years, they did a healthy experiment with the children by giving dolls for boys and guns and cars for girls to play with. After calculating the annual sale of these toys it was an amaze for the government because it showed that the majority of the children denied the toys they were given. It's clearly shows that gender is not something constructed by the society it is there from a person's birth itself. The things which are socially constructed is that men and women are 'supposed' to act differently or they are forced to act according to the

gender roles. The term gender can never be confined in two ideologies- masculine and feminine, but it is a spectrum which includes and listed between masculine and feminine.

In the mid-1960s, psychologist John Money, who was even considered as the founding father of sexology, have actually done an unethical or an immoral experiment on a boy named Bruce Reimer. He encouraged the gender reassignment of David Reimer, who was born a biological male but suffered irreparable damage to his penis as an infant. Born in 1965 as Bruce Reimer, his penis was irreparably damaged during infancy due to a failed circumcision. After encouragement from Money, Reimer's parents decided to raise Reimer as a girl. Reimer underwent surgery as an infant to construct rudimentary female genitals, and was given female hormones during puberty. During childhood, Reimer was never told he was biologically a male and regularly visited Money, who tracked the progress, in reality a regression, of his gender reassignment. Reimer unknowingly acted as an experimental subject in Money's hands, which he called the John/Joan case. The case provided results that were used to justify thousands of sex reassignment surgeries for cases of children with reproductive abnormalities. Despite his upbringing, Reimer rejected the female identity as a young teenager and began living as a male, by accepting the name David Reimer. He suffered severe depression throughout his life, which culminated in his suicide at thirty-eight years old. Reimer, and his public statements about the trauma of his transition, brought attention to gender identity and called into question the sex reassignment of Infants and children.

When the theory of gender comes into literature it creates a whole different realm which talks about what isn't taught in schools or something which isn't conveyed through parenting. Queer literature is a collective term used to define a genre in literature which is produced by or for the queer community that contains the characters, plot or theme of the literary portrayal of the people of the queer community. The Mahabharata is often considered as a queer text as it consists of a character named 'Sikhandi' who's having diversity in their gender identity. This epic has made a great influence on Hinduism and its believes. 'Sikhandi' is a character who reincarnates as Draupada's daughter who fought for the Pandavas as per the tale narrated by Bhishma. We can see that 'Sikhandi' in her previous life as Amba was turned down for marriage. Thus Amba performed intense penance and prayers with the intention of being the reason for Bhishma's demise since she felt so severely humiliated and wanted retribution. Lord Siva granted her wish to be reborn as a man to be strong to kill Bhishma and told that in her reincarnation she will be conscious about her past life. King Drupada penanced Lord Shiva and requested for a baby boy. Lord Shiva blessed him that he'll have a "Sthreepuman¹" and Drupada got confused and reconfirmed the blessings. Shiva reasserted that he'll have a 'boy like girl' and still the King remained obscured.

When the Queen gets pregnant the couple waited for a boy to born. But contrary to it, the Queen gave birth to a girl child. The King got shocked and he hid the real sex of his child and brought up her as a boy, who later became a great warrior. When Sikhandi hit adulthood King Drupada married her to the daughter of Hiranyavarma. In the earlier days of their marriage the bride got to know that she was married to a woman and got furious and complained to her father about this. King Hiranyavarma got irritated and asked an explanation but King Drupada stood in the same line telling that he has a son believing that Lord Shiva won't lie. Sikhandi got desperate about this and went to woods and penanced Yaksha, named Stharna and they interchanged their sex for a limited time. Sikhandi returned to his land and proved his masculinity and lived happily with 'his' wife.

This particular story of Sikhandi is considered to be as a queer tale because Sikhandi who was first named as Sikhandini by her parents and she was Amba in her past life who reincarnated for the demise of Bhishma. The way Shikandini was brought up doesn't really determine the gender of this particular character because it wasn't Sikhandini who felt herself as a man, rather it was Draupada who brought her up in the attire of a man. As mentioned before gender is not something imposed into a person by any external actions, it is something which is innately there in the brain. Here we show that the volume of the central subdivision of the Bed Nucleus of the Stria Terminalis (BSTc), a brain area that is essential for sexual behaviour is larger in men than in women. A female-sized BSTc was found in male-to-female transsexuals. The character 'Sikhandi' can never be considered as a queer/ trans character for the reason that she had gone through transition only for the sake of satisfying Hiranyavarma's daughter. It is explicit that Draupada was ashamed to reveal the sex of his child due to the reason that he announced to the whole kingdom that the baby he is going to have is a boy. Even when we consider her living with Hiranyavarma's daughter, it is portrayed in a way that it is a kind of blessing

¹ Man who is born as a woman

that Yaksha bestowed upon her, so it can't be considered that Sikhandini is even a lesbian. If we take the character of Amba too we can see that the motive for her urge for reincarnating as a man is to see the end of Bhishma. So it can be clearly said that the portrayal of Sikhandi in The Mahabharata is a misrepresentation of a queer character rather than a representation or a portrayal to make inclusivity.

Apart from the original version Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel The Palace of Illusions depicts the story of the Indian epic The Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view, which vividly portrays Sikhandi as a queer character. The novel is divided into forty three chapters. In the sixth chapter, which is named as "Incarnations", depicts the story of Sikhandi. Dhairya Ma, who was the maid of Draupadi, told that Sikhandi was Drupada's daughter and she was sent away because she did something terrible. In that section, Sikhandi wanted to see Draupadi, and he stayed with her for a day and a night and in that time he told his story. He invoked yaksha instead of God, because he lost faith in God. He said that the sex transition was unbearable to her and she fainted. When she awoke she found that she became a man, but still he remembered how women thought and what they longed for. This portrayal of Sikhandi isn't a misrepresentation because in this particular work it shows through the words of Sikhandi that he was feeling that he doesn't belong to a woman's body, "Have you heard the fable of the donkey that wrapped himself in a lion's hide so the other animals would fear him? Or of the wolf that hid under sheepskin so he could mingle undetected with his prey? I feel like both sometimes. A fake – or a hidden menace." (Divakaruni 46) The images of "the donkey that wrapped himself in a lion's hide", "the wolf that hid under sheepskin so he could mingle undetected with his prey" and "I feel like both sometimes" clearly shows that the character is not having a sense of comfort in his body. The book The Palace of Illusions thus can be considered as merely an adaptation not the exact portrayal of the stories in The Mahabharata.

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