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Does Hell Have No Fury like A Woman Scorned? Amba And Her Rage In The *Mahabharata*

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Abstract: Anger, one of the seven deadly sins in the Bible, is a recurrent motif in the myths of other cultures as well. Indian epics are rife with examples of overwhelming rage. This paper analyses the psychology and actions of Amba, a relatively lesser-known character in the *Mahabharata*, whose anger at her mistreatment is so intense that she chooses to carry it to her next birth. Amba voluntarily undergoes severe penances and then immolates herself to hasten her rebirth to seek revenge that will assuage her unappeasable wrath. The root of Amba's self-destructive fury deserves a closer study, which has been attempted in this paper.

Index Terms: Rage, revenge, Amba, Bhishma, The *Mahabharata*, *svayamvar*, marriage, gender

This paper attempts to interpret the character of Amba, one of the princesses of Kasi, her life, death, and her rebirth as described in the *Mahabharata*. Amba's life follows one of the most unusual trajectories in a book full of unique characters and incidents.ⁱ There are many characters whose actions, and the emotions that underlie these actions, form the foundation of incidents that propel its complex plot. Ambition, pride, covetousness, lust, anger and desire for revenge, along with a sense of responsibility, compassion, generosity and loyalty are the emotions that drive these multifaceted characters, who, despite their political, moral, social and/or martial eminence, are often overpowered by their passionsⁱⁱ that ultimately lead to the momentous battle at Kurukshetra.

While for some readers, it may be Shantanu's desire for Satyawati that lays the foundation of the future disaster; for others, it is the blind paternal love of Dhritarashtra or Shakuni's deviousness that led to the calamitous war. Often, Duryodhana's arrogant refusal to part with even an inch of the kingdom is seen as the cause of the subsequent troubles; whereas Jain scriptures blame Draupadi's desire to avenge her humiliation during the infamous Game of Dice for the destruction of the Kuru dynasty.ⁱⁱⁱ However, this paper explores the wrath of Amba from psychological, socio-cultural, and pragmatic perspectives. In the *Mahabharata*, Amba's death, rebirth and revenge are shown to be the result of an incendiary all-encompassing rage, which seems to have overtaken her life to such an extent that she chose to die and carry her unquenchable fury to the next life.

To begin with, the life of Amba, who is contemporaneously perceived as an example of fluid gender identities and queerness in ancient India, seems to be identical to the lives of the other royal women of that society. In the "Sambhava Parva" of the *Mahabharata*, the description of the three princesses of Kasi - Amba, Ambika and Ambalika - focuses on their physical attributes, thus placing the women in this text under the patriarchal lens that perceives women as objects of male desire and confines them within strict

social and sexual boundaries. K. M. Ganguli's translation of the text introduces the daughters of the king of Kasi - Amba, Ambika and Ambalika - at their *svayamvara* (translated literally by Ganguli as "self-choice") that attributes an illusory agency in the context of marriage to women of that time because it implies that royal women in this society were in a position to choose their husbands.^{iv}

However, in practice the suitability of the prospective grooms in most *svayamvaras* mentioned in this book was determined by the patriarchs of the clans and the prospective candidates had to belong to the right caste and community. They also had to fulfil the conditions of the *svayamvara* decided upon by the guardians of these women, who were kings trying to bolster their socio-political status. They needed warriors who could be valuable in political, social, martial as well as marital terms. For instance, Drupad wants his prospective son-in-law to be a warrior who has the potential to defeat his archenemy, Drona. So, Drupad chooses to test the mettle of the royal men who participate in the *svayamvara* of his daughter by testing their skills in archery. Predictably, it is Arjuna, the mightiest archer of his time, who wins the contest. At this point, one wonders if Draupadi has any choice in this matter. Is she in a position to reject the winner of this contest? Can she choose a man who may not have won this competition? She is clearly expected to marry the man who has the desirable attributes sought by her family and has fulfilled the conditions of *svayamvara*. The fact that the winner of Draupadi's *svayamvara* is seemingly an impecunious individual, while she is a princess, is deemed immaterial. Not only this, but her princely family remains silent when she ends up in a polyandrous marriage without having any say in the matter.

This digression into Draupadi's *svayamvara* primarily foregrounds the cultural context of the *svayamvara*, which is of crucial importance in understanding the trajectory of Amba's life. Ostensibly, the text suggests that the *svayamvara* of the daughters of the king of Kasi is based on self-choice. The interesting point here is that Bhishma appears in this assembly not to marry the princesses, but to forcibly carry off all three of them to Hastinapur for marriage with his half-brother, Vichitravirya. K.M. Ganguli explains that "Bhishma chose those maidens (on behalf of his brother)" (p. 220), which seems to suggest that neither the bridegroom nor the brides have much choice in this matter. The alliance of Vichitravirya and the Kasi princesses is decided by his mother, Satyawati, and Bhishma primarily on political and social grounds. Under these circumstances, can Bhishma's abduction of the Kasi princesses for marriage to his brother be considered valid? It is pertinent at this point to briefly look at the eight kinds of extant marital practices that Bhishma refers to in the text:

The wise have directed that when an accomplished person has been invited, a maiden may be *bestowed* on him, decked with ornaments and along with many valuable presents. Others again may *bestow* their daughters by accepting a couple of kine. Some again *bestow* their daughters by taking a fixed sum, and *some take away maidens by force*. Some wed with the consent of the maidens, some by drugging them into consent, and some by going unto the maidens' parents and obtaining their sanction. Some again *obtain wives as presents* for assisting at sacrifices. Of these, the learned always applaud the eighth form of marriage. Kings, however, speak highly of the *Swyamvara* (the fifth form as above) and themselves wed according to it. *But the sages have said that, that wife is dearly to be prized who is taken away by force, after the slaughter of opponents, from amidst the concourse of princes and kings invited to a self-choice ceremony*. Therefore, ye monarchs, I bear away these maidens hence by force. (emphasis added, p. 225)

The abovementioned statement shows that according to the marriage customs of those times, the tradition of a wife being forcibly taken away or abducted is valued in royal circles, which indicates the status of royal wives as possessions denied any choice in such momentous decisions of their lives. Ganguli continues that thereafter, Bhishma "brought the daughters of the king of Kasi unto the Kurus as tenderly as if they were his daughters-in-law, or younger sisters, or daughters. And Bhishma of mighty arms, impelled by the desire of benefiting his brother, having by his prowess brought them thus, *then offered those maidens possessing every accomplishment unto Vichitravirya* (emphasis added, p. 226);" thereby reinforcing the objectified status of these women who lack any agency.

However, Amba does not seem to subscribe to or follow this pattern of behaviour; she expresses a wish to be sent to the king of Saubha. In Ganguli's words: "the eldest daughter of the king of Kasi, with a soft smile, told him these words, 'At heart I had chosen the king of Saubha for my husband. He had, in his heart, accepted me for his wife. This was also approved by my father. At the self-choice ceremony also, I would have chosen him as my lord. Thou art conversant with all the dictates of virtue, knowing all this, do as thou likest'" (p. 226). Amba's self-assertion with respect to her marriage seems to be quite different from the other women in the book. Not only has she chosen a mate for herself, but she also declares it openly. It

is then stated that scholars of Vedas “permitted Amba, the eldest daughter of the ruler of Kasi to do as she liked. But he (Bhishma) bestowed with due rites the two other daughters, Ambika and Ambalika on his younger brother Vichitravirya” (p. 226).

At this point, it seems that Amba would succeed in getting married to the man of her choice. But she doesn't, as Salva, the king of Saubha/Saubala, whom she loves, refuses to marry her because he had been defeated by Bhishma at the *svayamvara*. Disappointed, she returns to Hastinapur and asks Vichitravirya to marry her. Yet again, her wish is not granted as she has openly professed love for another man and Vichitravirya apparently can't accept being the second choice. Due to his vow of celibacy, Bhishma too refuses to marry Amba, when she demands that, as her abductor, he do the right thing by her. Enraged and frustrated at this string of rejections at the hands of all the men who have wronged her, Amba seeks help from many, including Parasuram, but no one seems to be willing, or able, to help her. So, she decides to take revenge on Bhishma, whom she holds responsible for her current state, by herself. But due to the limitations she faces because of her gender, she can't fulfil her desire for revenge in this lifetime. Consequently, driven by her unappeasable rage, she then opts to seek revenge in her next life. And to accelerate the process, she voluntarily seeks death so that her rebirth can take place.

Such is the inauspicious origin of Amba's rage in *The Mahabharata*, which springs from helplessness at her rejection by all the men in her life: her father, who chooses to turn a blind eye to his daughter's plight; Salva, the man she had chosen to marry, who had initially been compliant, but had rejected her later due to social taboos; Bhishma, who, driven by his political and familial compulsions, chose to valorise his oath of celibacy over his duty to a woman whom he had abducted against her wish; Vichitravirya, for whom Amba was nothing more than an unwanted marital alliance, and consequently of little value, dismissed her plea for marriage as she had earlier professed love for another man. This string of rejections by powerful men that denied Amba any right over her own life and negated her desires due to social and political imperatives, seems to drive home the powerlessness of her status as a woman in a patriarchal society. She must have felt betrayed by all of them and forced to concede that she can't rely on any man to fulfil her wishes.

To accomplish her aims, she sought to be reborn as a man endowed with the authority granted by the society to men and possess the ability to act as she saw fit. At this point, it should also be noted that her rage at being repeatedly rebuffed that had originated in her helplessness, seems to be so extreme that it transcends the boundaries of life and death because it does not abate even after her rebirth. It is a constant reminder of her humiliation as a woman. Therefore, it seems that to nurture that undying hatred and anger, she must retain her womanhood; while to fulfil her thwarted wish for retribution, she needs to be a man. Consequently, after practicing severe austerities, she is finally granted the boon of being a man in her next lifetime and kill Bhishma. She is then born as Shikhandini to Drupad and after turning into a male, proves her mettle as a warrior by killing Bhishma, the man she deemed responsible for the troubles of her previous life and whom she had sworn to kill.

Contemporary criticism tends to focus on the gender transformation of Amba from Shikhandini to Shikhandi, that is perceived as representing the fluidity of gender identities in ancient India. However, this paper concentrates on the rage of Amba,^v which has catastrophic significance in the plot of the *Mahabharata*. It is not the kind of rage that ordinary mortals experience, which has a short tenure and leads to nothing more than a few broken plates. Amba's wrath transcends the boundaries of life and death; her sense of being cruelly and unjustly wronged and her desire to punish the wrongdoer make her voluntarily undergo the most severe hardships and self-immolation. This instance of self-destructive rage goes far beyond the trope of the archetypal angry young woman; as Amba literally burns herself to death, to hasten the process of fulfilling her anger-driven revenge. Even after her rebirth, she remembers the vengeance she has sworn and her resolve to destroy Bhishma remains unshaken. The abnormal nature of this anger, its tenacity, intensity, and relentlessness make it a subject of deep interest to a curious reader.

We have examples of such an epic rages in the classical literature of Greece as well. Homer begins the *Iliad* with these lines: “The wrath of Achilles is my theme, that fatal wrath which ... brought the Achaeans to much suffering”^{vi} Interestingly, Homer considers the terrible anger of Achilles and its destructive consequences to be the theme of his book dealing with the Trojan war and its ravages. It is noteworthy that Helen and her relationship with Paris is not deemed to be the formal theme of Homer's classic as one would expect. History and literature of the world are rife with instances of fiery rages. In the *Mahabharata* itself, the simmering rage of Duryodhana is very often seen as the cause of the destruction

of the Kuru clan. While others consider Draupadi's fury at her humiliation when Yudhishtira loses her in the Dice Game and she is dragged into the assembly by Dushasana, to be the cause of the war. Enraged at her public disgrace, Panchali swears to bring about the destruction of the Kauravas. However, most of these characters live to regret the rage that had consumed them, unlike Amba.

Yudhishtira, among the most sagacious characters of the text, reinforces this belief in the negative consequences of rage when he asserts, "Wrath, however hath been given to man for the destruction of the world." He explains the complexity of anger and its destructiveness in the following words:

Anger is the slayer of men and is again their prosperor. Know this..., that anger is the root of all prosperity and all adversity..., he that suppresseth his anger earneth prosperity. That man, again, who always giveth way to anger, reapeth adversity from his fierce anger. It is seen in this world that *anger is the cause of destruction of every creature* (emphasis added). ... The angry man commiteth sin. The angry man killeth even his preceptors. The angry man insulteth even his superiors in harsh words. The man that is angry faileth to distinguish between what should be said and what should not. There is no act that an angry man may not do, no word that an angry man may not utter. From anger a man may slay one that deserveth not to be slain and may worship one that deserveth to be slain.... Beholding all these faults, the wise control their anger, desirous of obtaining high prosperity both in this and the other world. It is for this that they of tranquil souls have banished wrath.^{vii}

Seen in this context, Amba's anger is destructive of others and herself and seems to be excessive and tragically self-indulgent. It seems disproportionate and largely futile. There are plenty of other characters who have been wronged in this book. Many are driven into rage like Draupadi during and after her public humiliation in the Game of Dice. Gandhari's decision to voluntarily blind herself after being married to Dhritarashtra smacks of anger that is directed against herself, possibly to punish herself for her inability to stop being married off to the blind Dhritarashtra.

But Amba's angry response is excessive and extreme from any perspective. In spite of so much suffering, that includes observance of severe penance, Amba's anger is satisfied only after bringing about the death of Bhishma. One wonders about the psychological trauma undergone by her that could be so overwhelming that it subsumes all other emotions and her whole being gets stuck on satisfying that one all-consuming emotion. She is willing to suffer all kinds of privations and even death, just to satisfy her monomaniacal anger. There is, therefore, no doubt about the capacity of Amba's overpowering rage to not just kill her but become the cause of the death of the greatest warrior in the *Mahabharata*. At this point, it is also vital to wonder about the origin of her rage. Amba did not seem to have protested when Bhishma forcibly took her and her sisters away from the *svayamvara*. It is only after reaching Hastinapur that she tells the Kurus about her wish to marry Salva. Her wishes are honoured, and she is sent with due respect to Salva, who chooses to reject her after having lost her to Bhishma. Vichitravirya also rejects her on her return from Salva's kingdom, as she has already professed her love for another man. She chooses not to go back to her father after this. The sole target of her anger is Bhishma for having brought her to this pass.

Amba's vengeful anger against Bhishma seems to stem from her frustration at being utterly powerless to seek redressal of her unjust treatment. She feels helpless, which feeds her festering sense of injustice at having been treated as an inanimate object by all these men, who reject her for one reason or the other, while she can only implore them to give her justice. Amba's anger gets fixated on Bhishma as she considers him to be the primary cause of her misery. He is the all-powerful patriarch of the Kuru clan, who can bend anyone to his will, in contrast to whom she is vulnerable and powerless in her womanhood. In his all-conquering patriarchal authority, he is the opposite of her own female weakness. Her single-minded desire to be the cause of Bhishma's death, therefore, seems to be Amba's only recourse to assuage her anger that emanates from her deeply wounded ego, although it has been claimed that "*Amba and Shikhandini* as cranky ladies of history are indeed celebrations of women who challenged conventional wisdom about appropriate female behavior (sic) from the ancient world."^{viii}

It is equally noteworthy that this unusual anger of a woman, who was expected to be submissive and obedient, is not overtly demonised in the *Mahabharata*. There seems to be an element of fatalistic acceptance of her extreme and irrational anger by Bhishma and the others. Her decision to kill Bhishma is presented more as a fulfilment of his destiny and Amba is seen more as an instrument of fate, and not necessarily as a woman subversively exercising her agency. Yet, Amba's rage also illustrates her refusal to outgrow this episode of her life; she chooses to freeze emotionally at this stage rather than evolve and

overcome this anger. The lack of support from the others whom she importunes for help seems to be an implicit critique of her attitude. Can her death, fluid gender identity, and single-minded focus on killing Bhishma be suggestive of this? Amba literally burns in the fire of her wrath, which could be seen as a metaphorical warning to the reader about the destructive potential inherent to holding on to one's anger. While reading the *Mahabharata*, there are many unanswered questions in a reader's mind; this paper is one of those attempts to delve into the complexities of another aspect of human psyche that is described with such subtlety by Vyasa in his magnum opus.

ⁱ Sridevi K. Menon, "From Rebellion to Degendering: A Study of Female Celibacy and Marriage in the Mahabharata."

Pursuits, Vo. XVI, 2018, pp. 34

ⁱⁱ Irawati Karve, *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. Orient BlackSwan, 1991, p. 80

ⁱⁱⁱ Irawati Karve, p. 92

^{iv} "And there he (Bhishma) also saw those three maidens that would select their own husbands." K. M. Ganguli (trans.). *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*

<https://ia600200.us.archive.org/14/items/TheMahabharataOfKrishnadwaipayanaVyasa/MahabharataOfVyasa-EnglishTranslationByKMGanguli.pdf>. p. 220 (Last accessed 15/02/2025)

^v Ajit V. Bhide, "Rage and Mahaabhaarata". *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*. 2007 Apr-Jun; 49(2): 140–142

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2917082>

^{vi} EV Rieu (Trans.) *Homer's Iliad*. Methuen & Co. 1949, p. 1

^{vii} *The Mahabharata. Vana Parva*, Ch. XXIX, <https://sacred-texts.com/hin/m03/m03029.htm>

^{viii} Pronema Bagchi & Pournima Inamdar, "The Damsels not in Distress: Undoing Myths of Selected Female Characters from the *Mahabharata*." *Langlit: An International Peer Reviewed Journal*. Vol. VIII, Issue 1, August 2021, p. 158

