
LOOKING BEYOND THE IMAGE: REINTRODUCING ARJUNA

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Abstract:

Mythical characters are often known and remembered for the impression they create on the readers' minds. One such character from the Indian epic Mahabharata is Arjuna – a great archer, loyal disciple, responsible brother and husband, and a good pal.

Since ancient times, the character of Arjuna – the third Pandava prince in the epic has been largely celebrated for his skills and accomplishments as a warrior. The many extant versions of this epic invariably perpetuate the same image of Arjuna. However, it is indeed worth pondering there an unexplored aspect of his personality besides this conventional heroic image. Accordingly, this project undertakes to remember Arjuna, recounting major episodes from his life and study them in pursuit of answers to the same question. It is a critical inquiry of the character of Arjuna from the Queer theory perspective with a view to throwing light on a, probably, eclipsed or neglected side of his personality, and thereby to reintroduce him to the readers. Also, it seeks to analyze if Arjuna thus saw through a Queer lens can serve to analyze the position of the Transgender/ Homosexuals in the society then and today.

Keywords: mythical, reintroducing, character, arjuna, heroic etc

Introduction

An image is “an impression presented to the public”. This idea holds true in case of Mythology, which provides an array of images in the form of mythological characters through engaging tales to a people. A conventional approach to such mythological characters has been if one might say, that of superstitious reverence and adoption in the day to day life. However, a postmodern mind primarily needs to intellectually and cognitively identify with such characters in order to follow suit. In such a situation, what surfaces is a multiplicity of perspectives; each individual comprehends a given character in his own way and consequently bring forth variant aspects of a given character. Therefore, it is viable to challenge and look beyond the images darted through the scriptures, and view them from new and different vantage points.

C. Rajagopalachari in the preface to the second edition of his work Mahabharata opines, “The Mahabharata discloses a rich civilization and a highly evolved society which though of an older world strangely resembles the India of our time with the same values and ideals”. This remark can be testified to befit the current situation by reconsidering the images of characters that this mythological epic perpetuates.

Accordingly, this project aims to study the iconic character of Arjuna from the Mahabharata in the revisionist fashion and also seeks to understand how the queer community might relate to this character today. To begin with, the image of the character Arjuna available in C. Rajagopalachari's Mahabharata and Anuja Chandramouli's work Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince would be traced and discussed at length to distinguish the projected image of the character from the enveloped self of Arjuna. Further, selected episodes from the life of the character would be given a revisionist and queer treatment. Conclusively, this enterprise would foreground a deviant angle of perception to the character of Arjuna and establish its relevance to the queer audience of the present and, probably, future times.

Queer Theory: Key Concepts

This extracts a quick view of Queer theory. It intends to familiarize the readers with the theory itself and also the key concepts that this project takes as its standpoint.

This area of critical theory is relatively recent and has been evolving ever since its inception. It is highly debated in the literary circles, with reference to its simultaneously existing derogatory and positive connotations. Hence, not a concrete and unanimous theorization on this approach is available. However, certain fundamental ideas of the above-mentioned theorists on Queer theory can be selectively used to critically analyze to a text. Accordingly, the ideas that are deemed to specifically suit the purpose of this project are as follows:

Key concepts:

- ‘Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. 'Queer' then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative’.

- 'Queer theory's main project is exploring the contesting of the categorization of gender and sexuality; identities are not fixed – they cannot be categorized and labelled – because identities consist of many varied components and that to categorize by one characteristic is wrong. Queer theory said that there is an interval between what a subject "does" (role-taking) and what a subject "is" (the self). So despite its title, the theory's goal is to destabilize identity categories, which are designed to identify the "sexed subject" and place individuals within a single restrictive sexual orientation.'
- 'Queer has been associated most prominently with bisexual, lesbian and gay subjects, but analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, intersexuality, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery.'
- 'Queer theorists challenged the validity and consistency of heteronormative discourse, and focused to a large degree on non-heteronormative sexualities and sexual practices.'

These key concepts pertaining to Queer theory can be used as landmarks to guide this project through its course. Can these pointers be used to view the mythological character of Arjuna in a different light? How effectively can this be brought to fruition? -all these would be the concerns of this project.

Remembering and Reintroducing Arjuna

At the very offset, it has to be taken into consideration that the narrative of Mahabharata is understood to be conditioned by its patriarchal and conservative milieu. Accordingly, an innovative perception would seem to challenge and deride the existing impression of the mythological epic and its highly held iconic characters.

This part is the core of the project which recalls the major events from the life of Arjuna and views the great epic hero through a queer lens. It intends to find gaps in the conventional image of Arjuna perpetuated by available mythological writings pertaining to the epic.

❖ The Curse:

A very interesting episode of Arjuna's life is that of Urvashi's curse. Arjuna refuses Urvashi's sexual advances on the grounds that she was a mother figure owing to her connections with his ancestor Pururava. A humiliated and angered Urvashi curses Arjuna that he would become a eunuch. However, Indra intervenes and gets her to reduce the curse to a period of one year of Arjuna's choice. Conventionally, this episode is meant to foretell and justify Arjuna's disguise as Brihanala during the last year of the exile and also shows how Arjuna adheres to the moral code against incest. However, Anuja Chandramouli's portrayal of this episode in her work brings in a new angle of thought. According to her, Urvashi curses Arjuna thus:

*"No self-respecting man turns away a woman who gives herself to him out of love. **You are not a man and your manhood is merely a vestigial organ that serves but ornamental purposes. I condemn you to spend the rest of your life shorn of your manhood.**"*

Here, is Urvashi unknowingly speaking the truth? Was there such a side to Arjuna which was kept from the world for a long time? Was it then Vyasa's way of camouflaging the transgender

aspect of Arjuna's personality? Given the social standards of the time when Mahabharata was set, Vyasa could not have portrayed a Kshatriya with a gender ambiguity. Therefore, he very cleverly creates this episode wherein Arjuna incurs Urvashi's curse meant to be a boon in disguise. It is indeed so, in the sense it reasons why Arjuna chooses to cross-dresses as a eunuch and not take any other role like his brothers. Also, the fact that Urvashi lets Arjuna choose the time to bring the curse into effect also seems to suggest how Arjuna could decide when he wanted to accept and reveal this part of him in an unquestionable manner.

Having thus analyzed this episode, one can go on to look at other occasions in the life of Arjuna to investigate his personality from the queer perspective.

➤ ARJUNA – THE WARRIOR:

Arjuna born to Kunti and Pandu as a boon from Indra was endowed with all his prodigious skills and valour as a warrior. He was “destined to perform” magnificent deeds. No doubt, he was larger par excellence, but the question is why did he strive for that stature? Was he actually that great a warrior?

Firstly, when looked at through the queer lens, what one observes is Arjuna's constant insecurity and insistence on being established as the greatest warrior. Arjuna is always seen to better his skills, practice day and night to reach perfection, strive for powerful weapons – all of which would make him unmatched as an archer-warrior. But was there a hidden agenda behind this perseverance? It is evident in C. Rajagopalachari's rendition of how Arjuna was intimidated by his brother Bhima and Karna. Many childhood episodes show Arjuna arguing with Bhima about how he is mightier than the latter. In the case of Karna, Arjuna's emotions become very evident when Karna challenges him to a one to one combat to see who among the two is the greatest.

Perhaps, Arjuna was aware of his other self, the transgender side of him ever since. It is quite obvious that a born Kshatriya that he was could not have lived with a gender ambiguity. Therefore, he tried to foreground his masculinity by accomplishing feats that were unparalleled and never let his other self-overpower him or even surface. This would explain why Arjuna felt intimidated by Bhīma and Karna. He was aware of the fact that only these two were competent enough and could challenge him to the title of the greatest warrior. It meant that they posed as constant threats, as for Arjuna unlike them winning that title would not just mean glory to his manliness, rather also mask his other self. Therefore, it was doubly important for him to outwit the others and establish himself the greatest and mightiest.

Again it cannot be said that Arjuna can solely claim the many accolades given to him. One can see how external factors have always intervened to help raise Arjuna to the pedestal of a great warrior. It is clearly described how Arjuna was aided by Bhima in abducting King Dhruvada, similarly the excitement Arjuna displays in attacking Jarashandha again points out his desperate need to prove himself. The following quote from C. Rajagopalachari's Mahabharata brings out Arjuna's feelings:

"What is the use to us of an existence without heroic deeds, born as we are of an illustrious

line? A Kshatriya, though endowed with all good qualities, will not become famous if he does not exert himself.”

The above expression conforms to Arjuna's excessive enthusiasm mixed with hidden fears in a very subtle manner. Similarly, one cannot ignore that Dronacharya in demanding Ekalavya's thumb and Kripacharya in restraining Karna from combating Arjuna on the grounds of the former's low birth have also contributed their share in securing Arjuna's position. Equally important is the Draupadi Swayamvara episode. It was clearly a marriage of convenience, for King Dhruvada had intentionally arranged for an ordeal that only Arjuna could pass. Sure, King Dhruvada had his reasons, that of winning the alliance of the mighty Arjuna through marriage to war Dronacharya his sworn enemy. However, here the concern is that the ordeal was unfair to other contenders and a huge conspiracy; meaning to hail Arjuna for emerging victoriously through this ordeal on the basis of his skills is not agreeable. Again, Krishna creates an artificial eclipse so as to trick everyone on the battlefield and enables Arjuna to kill Jayadratha by treachery. What is observed in all these situations is that Arjuna has always needed assistance, without which he would not have accomplished many of his feats. If so, is it that every time some implicit handicap of Arjuna's was being covered up for by the people who wanted him to attain the glory of a great warrior?

Yet another episode, is that of Bhishma Vadha, wherein Arjuna with the aid of Shikhandi brings down the grandsire and great warrior Bhishma. Bhishma refuses to take weapons against a woman, Amba reborn as Shikhandi and Arjuna screened by Shikhandi targets the unarmed Bhishma. However, as C. Rajagopalachari describes this scene, he says Bhishma's last words were:

“This is Arjuna's arrow and not Shikhandi's.”

Can these words be interpreted differently? Bhishma surrendered before Shikhandi beyond doubt. But it is to be noted that Shikhandi covered Arjuna, was he then eclipsing the transgender Arjuna? Is it possible that Bhishma saw through Arjuna's other side before he breathed his last and uttered the above words in that sense?

Thus, the image of Arjuna as the greatest warrior can be said to be a projected one, a virtual one.

➤ ARJUNA – THE MAN OF MANY WOMEN:

Arjuna is celebrated as a master of romance; he is known for the many relations he has had with women like Draupadi, Uloopi, Chitrangadaa, Subhadra, Alli and many more. However, this image of Arjuna, that of a passionate lover can be challenged.

In the case of Draupadi, it is known that though he won her single-handedly at the swayamvara, he had to share her with his other four brothers. Though one can argue that he was bound by the social norms of marriage and duty towards his mother and brothers, in his mind he might have objected to this arrangement. If so, in Chitra Devakarunin Banerjee's Palace of Illusions – a work written from the feminist perspective, why is Draupadi shown to be annoyed with Arjuna for silently agreeing to share her with his brothers? Why does she find him rather cold and inattentive towards a beauty like her? Perhaps, he did not seem so possessive about her because

he just wasn't. Instead, one finds Arjuna taking a self-imposed exile during which he forms ties with Uloopi, Chitrangadaa and much later Subhadra.

In the case of Uloopi, the Naga princess, Arjuna had never fallen in love with her. He only fulfils the desires of the love-struck Uloopi in lieu of which he receives the boon of invincibility in water from her. Similarly, he meets Chitrangadaa- the Manipuri princess, marries her and consummates the marriage to have a son Babruvahana whom he hands over as promised to the Manipuri king to be his heir, and proceeds to leave them behind. It is worth noticing how Arjuna was hardly a family man, all his wives were fated to be single mothers. Can this be understood as Arjuna's disinterest in women?

The myth of an Alli, a Pandyan princess perhaps may help understand Arjuna's equation with women better. Alli was the heir to the Pandyan kingdom after her father. It is said that her sworn enemies were men, whom she sought and destroyed. It is believed that her chastity was the source of her power. When Arjuna chances upon her, he mesmerized by her valour and he expresses his ardent desire for her in following words from a play Alli Natakam by Chennai B. Ratna Nayakar:

"When will I behold her / Embrace, and kiss ...

When will we indulge in love play/ How will I take her to bed.. "

Critics opine that here Arjuna's language is one of conquest and subjugation, not of love and caring. And it holds true as Arjuna seduces the man-hating Alli and forces her into marriage and making love to him. When Alli loses her chastity she is rendered powerless. Consequently, out of no other alternative, she surrenders herself to Arjuna.

This approach of Arjuna can be applied to the many relations he had with women. Either he tamed them, or married them and procreated for clearly political reasons. What should be highlighted is that, if Arjuna was unattached to any of these women, then his indulgences were strict to assert his manliness. This again can be questioned for he could be concealing his gender ambiguity in doing so.

➤ ARJUNA – THE TRANSVESTITE:

Arjuna seems to be good at disguise. He has disguised on many occasions: as a brahmana after escaping the fire at the wax palace, as a eunuch to seduce Alli, and of course as Brihanala the eunuch dancer at king Virata's palace during the thirteenth year of exile. These situations also need to reconsider as a part of this project.

It is worth recalling how though disguised as the brahmana, Arjuna's kshatriya features surface in the court of King Drupada at the swayamvara of Draupadi. It is suggestive of the fact that the hidden self unknowingly surfaces against ones will letting others see through your disguise. Further, as a brahmana, Arjuna's candidature for the swayamvara is debated in the court by others. This scene can be seen metaphorically to suggest how Arjuna's projected self is debatable amongst a normal people and what lies hidden is probably his actual self. Just like Arjuna tries hard to conceal his Kshatriya features under the guise of a brahmana and tries to be

a brahmana, one can say that Arjuna perhaps was always trying to be a man, do things like conquering land and women alike which fall under the male domain and in turn suppressing his other self. Can't it be arguably said that perhaps Arjuna was shocked to hear the truth from Urvashi and he accepted his true self only later in life after he had gathered all possible titles as a Kshatriya and proved himself a man? It can be said that Arjuna who chose the life of a eunuch for a year, he actually lived it thoroughly that too without incurring the mocking laughter from the world.

➤ ARJUNA – THE PAL

The most important scene right before the war, wherein Arjuna, facing his kinsmen on the battlefield, breaks down and Krishna preaches him about his dharma as a Kshatriya and mentally prepares him for the war can be understood differently. If Arjuna and Krishna share more than just male bonding, then this scene can be said to figuratively suggest how they are together on one side representing the transgender community fighting for their rights against the norms of the erstwhile society represented by their kinsmen on the other side. Krishna here can be said to preach Arjuna about the need to assert himself in every way possible and not keep himself from marching forth because he is different from them; that difference should be rather empowering not discouraging.

➤ ARJUNA – THE ARCHER:

It is interesting to note how Arjuna's weapon – the bow and arrow can be considered as a motif suggestive of his transgender self. William Stewart in his work Dictionary of Images and Symbols in Counseling opines that:

“When the bow and arrow are considered together, the one is virtually useless without the other. The bow... must submit to being bent. The arrow, likewise, has to submit to being moulded; a crooked arrow is of no use. Neither arrow nor bow can take the place of the other... If the bow and arrow symbolize feminine and masculine, then they provide a powerful image of interdependence and harmony of function.”

In keeping with Stewart's words, one can suppose that the bow and arrow if considered symbolically represent Arjuna's repressed and projected self respectively. For Arjuna- the warrior to perform his other self-has to be bent or suppressed. Similarly, one can say just like the bow and arrow are a pair, Arjuna's personality probably has features of both the male and the female which are inseparable and coexist in him.

Conclusion

To sum up, it can be said that the epic hero Arjuna, though undoubtedly a skilled archer apparently had another side to his personality which remained unnoticed. Else, a warrior who is meant to be a masculine in his appearance would not have been so easily slipped into the guise of a eunuch who danced and sang without being discovered. As he was "destined to perform", he might have been given certain physical qualities, not sexual orientation per se, at birth which surfaced at a predetermined time. Thus, from the Queer theory angle what becomes clear is that the Arjuna is probably a male performatively and a transsexual cognitively.

In the present context, Arjuna read thus can be said to challenge the normative categorization of gender within the caste system. His character poses a challenge to the conservative, parochial and normative society with respect to the image of a warrior/ hero. Can a warrior/ hero perform while being a transgender and be still accepted and hailed beyond time?

Conclusively, if Arjuna were thus reintroduced as a transgender heroic figure, he may serve as a representative to the queer community which can hope to have better position and opportunity in the society on the basis of their merit than the need to befit a category of gender or sexual orientation.

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