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Unbowed, Unbent, Unbinary: Shikhandi and the Politics of Gender in Epic Tradition

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Abstract

Unbowed, Unbent, Unbinary: Shikhandi and the Politics of Gender in Epic Tradition examines the complex gender identity of Shikhandi in the *Mahabharata* as a critical lens through which the fluidity, performativity, and contestation of gender norms in ancient Indian narratives can be understood. Traditionally positioned as both warrior and catalyst in Bhishma's downfall, Shikhandi's presence destabilizes the rigid binaries that structure dharma, kinship, and heroism in epic literature. This study interrogates how Shikhandi's transition from Shikhandini to Shikhandi, achieved not biologically but through divine and social negotiation, complicates patriarchal expectations of embodiment and legitimacy. By foregrounding Shikhandi's role in warfare, lineage, and oath-bound justice, the paper argues that the epic tradition does not merely tolerate gender variance but embeds it as a narrative necessity. Moreover, the text foregrounds how Shikhandi becomes a political site where masculine honour, feminine vulnerability, and non-binary agency intersect, challenging the perception that ancient narratives are wholly restrictive in their framing of identity. Through literary analysis and gender theory, the paper highlights Shikhandi not as an anomaly but as an intentional disruption to binary logic. Ultimately, the study emphasizes that Shikhandi's unclassifiable identity is not a deviation but a deliberate assertion of multiplicity within the epic imagination, rendering the figure both unbowed by normative constraints, unbent by social prescriptions, and unmistakably unbinary.

Keywords: Binary, Tradition, Gender, Identity, Sexuality

Introduction

The *Mahabharata*, one of the most significant epics of South Asia, offers a layered narrative where questions of justice, identity and power are deeply interwoven. Among its diverse characters, Shikhandi emerges as a particularly compelling figure who unsettles conventional ideas of gender. Born as Amba and later transformed into Shikhandi, their life trajectory highlights both the violence of patriarchal norms and the possibility of self-fashioning beyond fixed identities. In the epic's decisive moment, Shikhandi becomes central to Bhishma's downfall, reminding us that those who occupy marginalized positions can shift the course of history. This paper aims to analyze Shikhandi not only as a mythological character but also as an entry point for discussions in contemporary gender studies. Reading Shikhandi through the lens of transgender and queer discourse allows us to see how the *Mahabharata* acknowledges identities that exceed binary categories. The study will engage with the questions of recognition, agency and embodiment, showing how ancient narratives anticipate debates that resonate with present day scholarship on gender diversity.

By critically revisiting Shikhandi's story, the paper also reflects on the ethical questions raised by their presence- how societies choose to remember, marginalize or reinterpret figures who resist normative expectations. Ultimately, the study underscores how classical Indian texts, rather than being static, continue to inform and expand global conversations on gender, identity and justice.

The *Mahabharata* is not merely an epic of kings and wars; it is a text of extraordinary philosophical depth where identity, justice, and destiny intersect. Amid its sprawling narrative, Shikhandi stands out as a figure who embodies both rupture and continuity—rupture in defying the gender system of their world, and continuity in fulfilling the cyclical logic of karma and dharma. Born as Amba, humiliated and denied justice, and later reborn as Shikhandi, this character reveals the capacity of the epic imagination to question essentialist notions of gender and personhood.

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Amba's initial rejection by Bhishma and her subsequent curse foreground the violence inherent in patriarchal order. When she vows to be the cause of Bhishma's death and is reborn as Shikhandi, her story becomes a narrative of gender transformation and moral agency. In the climactic battle, Bhishma lowers his weapons before Shikhandi, refusing to fight one who was born a woman—an act that marks both his downfall and the epic's symbolic rebalancing of justice. Through a modern lens, Shikhandi's story anticipates what Judith Butler terms gender performativity, the notion that gender is not a fixed essence but an enacted identity constituted through social norms and repetition (Butler 45). Shikhandi's identity is neither wholly masculine nor feminine; rather, it is performative, situational, and strategic—crafted in defiance of a world that refuses complexity. Reading Shikhandi through such theoretical perspectives allows us to see that the *Mahabharata* itself acknowledges forms of being that exceed binary classification.

This paper thus argues that Shikhandi functions as a liminal agent who destabilizes both the epic's patriarchal ethics and its metaphysical certainties. Their story demonstrates how Indian mythic traditions encode fluid understandings of gender, anticipating the queer theoretical insight that identity is historical, contingent, and relational.

Classical philologists like V.S. Sukthankar and J.A.B. van Buitenen treated Shikhandi as a narrative device in the *Mahabharata*'s moral economy. Van Buitenen (1973) ^[10] regarded Shikhandi's transformation as a karmic mechanism ensuring cosmic justice. However, later scholars such as Wendy Doniger shifted attention toward the erotic and gendered complexities of Hindu myth. Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* interprets Shikhandi's story as evidence that "Hindu mythology has always known the instability of gender" (Doniger 310).

Feminist scholars reframed Amba/Shikhandi as a critique of patriarchy. Uma Chakravarti, in *Gendering Caste* (2003), interprets Amba's reincarnation as an act of self-reclamation, a rebirth that exposes the limits of female subjectivity under dharmic codes. Arti Dhand (2008) ^[3] emphasizes that Shikhandi's ambiguous existence forces the *Mahabharata* to confront its own moral contradictions.

Queer readings by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai in *Same-Sex Love in India* (2000) identify Shikhandi as part of a continuum of Indian narratives recognizing gender fluidity and same-sex desire. Serena Nanda's ethnography *Neither Man nor Woman* (1990) links Shikhandi to the living *hijra* traditions that occupy similar sacred-social margins, while Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014) popularizes this perspective, arguing that Indian myth inherently celebrates ambiguity: "the triumph of the unclassifiable over the order of certainty" (Pattanaik 122).

Postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak and Ashis Nandy further complicate these readings. Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" as the silenced subject (Spivak 28) resonates with Amba's initial voicelessness, while Nandy (1983) ^[7] critiques how colonial modernity repressed indigenous models of gender fluidity. The recovery of Shikhandi thus becomes a decolonial gesture, reclaiming cultural epistemes marginalized by Western rationalism.

These diverse frameworks converge on a single insight: Shikhandi embodies the tension between social exclusion

and metaphysical necessity, making them central to India's evolving discourse on gender, justice, and identity.

Amba's story begins as one of humiliation. Abducted by Bhishma along with her sisters Ambika and Ambalika for the Kuru princes, Amba resists the marriage arrangement, declaring her love for King Salva. Yet, rejected by both Bhishma and Salva, she becomes a figure cast out of the social order—a woman without place. Her lamentation reveals the intersection of gender and honor: she is dishonored not by her desire but by the social codes that render her desire illegitimate.

When she turns to Bhishma for redress and he refuses, Amba's anguish transforms into a curse: "I shall be the cause of your death." The *Mahabharata* here dramatizes how gendered injustice transforms into cosmic retribution. Amba's suicide and rebirth as Shikhandi mark the refusal of a moral universe that silences female agency.

Shikhandi's upbringing in the house of Drupada introduces the theme of social disguise. Born female but raised as male, Shikhandi learns to perform masculinity as a survival strategy. The tale of acquiring a male body through divine exchange with a yaksha emphasizes that gender in the epic is mutable and instrumental—a condition negotiable through divine and social pacts rather than biological determinism.

At the war's decisive moment, Bhishma recognizes Shikhandi's past and lowers his bow, declaring he will not fight one who was once a woman. His chivalric restraint becomes his undoing, as Arjuna shoots the fatal arrows. This scene encapsulates the irony of dharma: Bhishma's moral absolutism, rooted in gendered codes of honor, becomes the vehicle of his destruction.

Symbolically, Shikhandi's presence destabilizes the epic's moral logic. The supposed impurity of their body becomes the condition for divine justice. This inversion recalls the broader Indian motif of *Ardhanarishvara*, where Shiva's fusion with Shakti represents the unity of opposites. Shikhandi embodies a similar metaphysical principle: the reconciliation of binary oppositions within a single being.

Thematically, Shikhandi represents both vengeance and transcendence. Their life expresses the cyclical continuity of karma yet also asserts individuality against cosmic determinism. The *Mahabharata* thus encodes gender transformation as both personal revolt and cosmic necessity, a paradox that modern theory helps unravel.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* provides a powerful lens to read Shikhandi's gender. Butler argues that gender identity is constituted through "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 191). Shikhandi's repeated performance of masculinity—training as a warrior, marrying a woman, fighting in battle—constitutes their social identity. Yet this performativity is exposed when Bhishma recalls their female origin, revealing that all gender is contingent performance within social memory.

Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* complements this reading by framing gender as a discourse of power. Shikhandi's body becomes the site upon which social and moral regulations are inscribed. As Amba, the body was disciplined by chastity and honor; as Shikhandi, it becomes weaponized for justice. Foucault's insight that power "produces subjects" (Foucault 27) is dramatized here: Shikhandi's transformation is the production of a new subjectivity through resistance.

In the Indian theoretical context, Serena Nanda's ethnography provides continuity between myth and lived

experience. The *hijra* communities, who invoke figures like Shikhandi and Aravan, embody a cultural logic in which gender variance is sacred, not pathological. This resonates with Wendy Doniger's argument that Hindu mythology "takes transformation as a given of the human condition" (Doniger 312).

Furthermore, Ruth Vanita's scholarship reframes queerness in Indian thought not as Western import but as indigenous continuity. Vanita notes that Indian myths often allow "gender crossing to restore cosmic balance" (Vanita and Kidwai 25). Shikhandi's revenge thus aligns with *dharma*, demonstrating that justice may require inhabiting non-normative identities.

The confluence of these theories suggests that Shikhandi's story performs a proto-queer politics of resistance. Their existence challenges the epic's patriarchal realism while participating in its metaphysical order. This duality—rebellion within belonging—anticipates the contemporary queer struggle to assert difference without disconnection from tradition.

Shikhandi's afterlife in Indian cultural memory is marked by both erasure and rediscovery. Traditional retellings often downplay their gender transformation, reducing it to a supernatural anomaly. Yet in modern reinterpretations—literary, performative, and cinematic—Shikhandi has re-emerged as a symbol of gender fluidity and resistance.

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* (2014) popularized this figure for contemporary audiences, emphasizing myth as metaphor for human diversity. Theatre groups and queer activists in India have since reclaimed Shikhandi as a trans ancestor, using the story to articulate local forms of queer identity that predate colonial binaries.

In popular media, plays such as *I Am Shikhandi* (by Sharanya Ramprakash, 2017) reimagine the character as a modern trans narrative, using humor and satire to expose ongoing gender hierarchies. Such reinterpretations illustrate what Aleida Assmann calls "cultural memory as negotiation"—a dynamic process in which the past is continually rewritten to address present concerns.

This reclamation also intersects with legal and social transformations in India, particularly after the 2014 Supreme Court judgment recognizing transgender persons as a "third gender." Shikhandi has been invoked in judicial and activist discourses as evidence of India's indigenous acknowledgment of non-binary identities (Nanda 59). Thus, myth becomes both heritage and argument—a way of claiming belonging through ancient precedent.

However, as scholars like Gayatri Gopinath warn, such celebrations must not flatten complexity. Shikhandi's narrative contains pain, rejection, and ambivalence; it is not a simple tale of triumph. To read it critically is to recognize the enduring tension between recognition and erasure, a tension that continues to define queer existence within conservative societies.

Shikhandi's story in the *Mahabharata* reveals that questions of gender, justice, and identity have always been integral to Indian moral imagination. Far from being an anomaly, Shikhandi embodies the epic's deeper philosophical insight: that truth often emerges from the margins, and that the boundaries of *dharma* must expand to accommodate difference.

Through Amba's suffering and Shikhandi's transformation, the epic dramatizes the performative and constructed nature

of gender, centuries before modern theory articulated it. Reading Shikhandi through Butler's performativity, Foucault's discourse of power, and Indian traditions of gender plurality demonstrates how classical texts can enrich global conversations on gender.

Ultimately, Shikhandi stands unbowed, unbent, unbinary—a figure who defies confinement yet fulfills destiny. Their story urges a reimagining of justice beyond exclusion, and a recognition that identity, like *dharma* itself, is fluid, contextual, and ever in motion.

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