
Examining Gender Constructs in Anand Neelakantan's *Nala and Damayanti: An Eternal Tale from the Mahabharata*

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Abstract:

Literature plays a crucial role in creating awareness for an egalitarian society. This paper explores Anand Neelakantan's *Nala and Damayanti: An Eternal Tale from the Mahabharata*, a contemporary retelling of the *Mahabharata*, through the perspective of Sandra Bem's *The Lenses of Gender* (1993). It examines how gender constructs, societal hierarchies, and cultural norms influence individual agency and the expression of love. By utilizing Bem's ideas of androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism, the study investigates how characters internalize, resist, or challenge these gendered expectations. Neelakantan's novel empowers characters who have often been trapped by strict social and gender roles, while Bem's notions help to understand how these roles are both upheld and challenged. The retelling highlights the story of Nala, a Nishada king, and Damayanti, a princess showcasing the tension between societal norms and personal choices, while illustrating love as a transformative power that can break down rigid social structures. By examining instances of caste discrimination, and internalized inferiority complex through Bem's gender perspectives, this study reveals how Neelakantan's retelling flips traditional gender roles. The paper further investigates how love serves as a transformative and egalitarian force, empowering characters to overcome social and cosmic limitations. Through this analysis, the study reveals that mythological retellings can highlight the ongoing issues of gender bias, critique social and institutional inequalities, and inspire the society to reflect on gender justice, equality, and self-determination.

Keywords: Retelling, Gender roles, Gender justice, Determination and Equality.

Introduction:

Mythological stories have always reflected societal values. They showcase cultural aspects on gender, caste, and hierarchy. The *Mahabharata* is notable for its deep exploration of human behaviour, ethics, and relationships. While many interpretations emphasize key figures like Draupadi or Sita, of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the characters of Nala and Damayanti provide a valuable perspective on agency, love, and social limitations. In his

retelling, *Nala and Damayanti: An Eternal Tale from the Mahabharata*, Anand Neelakantan reimagines this tale to highlight the emotional and intellectual agency of the main characters. He shows how people navigate social hierarchies, divine influences, and strict gender roles. This study uses Sandra Bem's *The Lenses of Gender* (1993), focusing on androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism, as a key framework to analyse the retelling. Bem's theory shows how cultural beliefs about gender shape views on status, behaviour, and relationships. It also reveals how people internalize and resist these beliefs. By comparing evidence from the retelling with Bem's lenses, the paper explores how Nala and Damayanti deal with caste-based hierarchies, societal pressures, and assert their personal choices and resilience.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to connect an ancient story to current discussions on gender. The research illustrates how literature can critique established social norms, challenge gendered hierarchies, and encourage reflection on personal agency, equality, and justice. This analysis adds to feminist literary canon by showcasing the lasting importance of mythological stories in tackling present-day social issues and promoting discussions on gender equity.

Objectives of the Study:

To use Sandra Bem's *The Lenses of Gender*, including androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism, to see how gender norms shape character behaviour, and relationship dynamics.

To investigate how this retelling challenges traditional social hierarchies, caste discrimination, and strict gender roles.

To explore how characters express personal agency, assert their autonomy, and resist societal and divine influences.

To showcase how mythological retellings can be reflected and tackle present-day issues like gender inequality, stereotyping, and social bias.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology:

This study uses Sandra Bem's *The Lenses of Gender* (1993) as its main framework to analyse Anand Neelakantan's *Nala Damayanti: An Eternal Tale from the Mahabharata*. Bem identifies three common cultural lenses: androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism. These lenses shape society's understanding of gender and contribute to inequality. Androcentrism views male experience as the standard and makes female experience secondary. Gender polarization amplifies the differences between men and women and sets societal norms for acceptable behaviour. Biological essentialism makes gender hierarchies seem natural by presenting them as biologically determined instead of socially created. By using these lenses, the study examines how characters in the novel accept, resist, or challenge the social hierarchies imposed on them. The research method is qualitative and interpretive. It uses textual analysis as the main tool. Select episodes and dialogues from the novel act as data points. These are examined to find representations of gender norms, caste discrimination, and the negotiation of agency.

Review of Literature:

Early feminist work in Indian mythological studies began in the late 20th century. These efforts questioned patriarchal interpretations of epics and highlighted the experiences of women characters who were often overlooked. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, “The epics in India do not belong to the past alone — they are also part of the contemporary consciousness” (Mukherjee 603). For example, Volga’s *The Liberation of Sita* (1993) presented the *Ramayana* from Sita’s perspective. It portrayed her as an active participant in her own fate, not just a passive victim. These early pieces focused on resisting male-centered narratives and critiquing the acceptance of gender hierarchies found in classic stories. In the early 2000s, scholars broadened this approach to look at *Mahabharata* characters beyond Draupadi, the main figure. Feminist retellings by authors like Devdutt Pattanaik and later Ira Mukhoty (2020) depicted women as strong, clever, and ethically independent. This challenged strict gender roles and societal norms. These works pictured how retellings could reclaim female power and offer different moral and social perspectives.

More recent studies have stressed the significance of these retellings. They are relevant to the present-day social discussions on gender, caste, and personal choices. In Devdutt Patnaik’s words, “Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. The understanding may be religious or secular. Ideas such as rebirth, heaven and hell, angels and demons, fate and freewill, sin, Satan, and salvation are religious myths. Ideas such as sovereignty, nation, state, human right, women’s rights, animal rights, and gay rights are secular myths. Religious or secular, all myths make sense to one group of people. Not to everyone. They cannot be rationalized beyond a point. In the final analysis, you either accept them or don’t” (Patnaik xvi). Writers such as Anand Neelakantan have not only highlighted female agency but also explored the relationships between male and female protagonists. They illustrate how love, ethical conflicts, and social pressures intersect. These reveal that modern retellings do not just reinterpret mythology; they actively engage with today’s social issues while providing important insights into inequality, stereotyping, and the struggle for agency.

Despite this progress, researches have focused on well-known narratives on characters like Draupadi and Sita leaving aside stories like Nala and Damayanti. This gap shows the need for research that applies contemporary gender theory, like Sandra Bem’s *The Lenses of Gender*, to retellings of lesser-known epics. Such studies could explore how both male and female characters manage hierarchical and gendered structures.

Parallel to literary retellings, feminist scholars have used theoretical frameworks to examine gender representation in classical epics. Sandra Bem’s *The Lenses of Gender* offers a basic model for understanding how androcentrism, gender polarization, and biological essentialism shape views on gender. Bem’s work shows how cultural norms are absorbed and repeated, affecting both male and female behaviour. Earlier studies mostly focused on well-known characters, uncovering how social hierarchies and gender norms limit women’s choices while also defining masculinity through dominance, moral authority, and heroism.

A few scholars have thoroughly explored how characters deal with these gendered expectations, resist internalized norms, or challenge social hierarchies using their personal choices.

Existing research on Nala and Damayanti mainly looks at narrative structure, symbolism, and ethical dilemmas like love, fate, and the effects of moral choices. The story has been seen as a commentary on divine intervention: *Karma*, and *Dharma*. Most studies focus on mythological and literary analysis instead of feminist critique. There is a clear gap in exploring the tale through gender theory. This is especially important in understanding how both male and female protagonists deal with caste-based hierarchies, societal expectations, and personal choices.

Recent studies highlight how retelling myths can change the views of the society. In her article titled “*Best-Selling Myths*,” Reena Singh writes, “Besides philosophical, spiritual and modern insights, stuff that mythological accounts are renowned for, these new stories like liberties with the plot, often placing characters in a contemporary context.” These retellings allow us to critique social biases, challenge hierarchical and gender norms, and examine the dynamics of agency and relationships. Writers like Neelakantan show that by rethinking classic stories, literature can address current social issues such as gender inequality, stereotypes, and the balance of personal and social responsibility. However, a few studies explicitly connect Bem’s gender lenses with mythological retellings, especially for tales like Nala and Damayanti, to explore how these stories deal with today’s concerns about fairness and justice.

Research Gap:

While there is a lot of research on gender representations in the *Mahabharata*, most studies focus on classical interpretations or main characters like Draupadi and Sita. This leaves many parallel minor stories unexamined. There are particularly a few researches on feminist retellings of tales like Nala and Damayanti through the lens of modern gender theory. This study aims to fill that gap by analysing a contemporary retelling that highlights both male and female viewpoints. It bridges the classical myths to current discussions on gender and shows how literature can challenge deep-rooted social biases. It also encourages reflection on personal choice and equality. Moreover, the paper points out how love and individual decisions in the story act as transformative forces that challenge traditional hierarchies and gender norms.

Nala Damayanti: An Eternal Tale from the Mahabharata by Anand Neelakantan:

The narrative in the celestial realm. The creator, Brahma, is about to destroy humanity, considering them selfish and vile. His son, the golden swan Hemanga, begs for their chance to survive. He asks to find a couple whose pure love can endure the worst hardships sent by Kali, the God of fate. Hemanga soon learns of Nala, the noble King of the Nishadas, and master chef, and Damayanti, the intelligent Princess of Vidarbha. Hemanga acts as a messenger and ignites a passionate love between them. Nala hesitates at first because he sees himself as a low-caste man unworthy of the high-born princess. During Damayanti’s Swayamvara, three powerful Gods—Indra, Agni, and Yama—disguise themselves as Nala

to deceive her. However, guided by her senses, Damayanti distinguishes the real Nala and chooses him.

Kali, furious at the victory of true human love, seeks revenge. He possesses Nala's jealous twin brother, Pushkara, and gets him to set up a rigged game of dice against Nala. Nala plays to protect his people's belongings but loses everything, including his kingdom, and finally stakes his own freedom. Overcome with shame, Nala leaves Damayanti in the forest, thinking his absence will shield her from his bad luck. Kali then changes Nala into an ugly dwarf named Bahuka, hoping Damayanti will abandon him when she sees his hideous form. Despite facing death and nearly killing a hunter, Damayanti remains resolute and decides to return home to search for him. Hemanga tracks Nala down and finds him serving King Rituparna of Ayodhya, an amusing and eccentric ruler whose joy distracts him from Kali's influence.

To force a meeting before her deadline, Damayanti sends a false invitation for a second swayamvara. This pushes the desperate Nala, in his Bahuka form, to hurry Rituparna to Vidarbha using his knowledge of horses. Damayanti immediately chooses the ugly dwarf. With Rituparna's generous help. She challenges Nala to reclaim his kingdom. Nala agrees to play Dvapara again, but this time, with Rituparna's guidance on self-reliance, he bets his own life. This clever move defeats Kali since the god cannot kill someone who is already cursed, forcing the curse to be lifted. With every roll, Nala's handsome appearance returns. Nala wins, Kali disappears, and the couple's true love triumphs over fate. Hemanga goes back to Brahma, who assures him that the story will endure forever, with the true hero being the "eternal messenger of love." (Neelakantan 216)

Analysis Using Bem's Lenses of Gender: Androcentrism, Gender Polarization, and Biological Essentialism:

Sandra Lipsitz Bem defines androcentrism as the tendency that "men are inherently superior to women but a more treacherous underpinning of that perception: a definition of males and male experience as a neutral standard or norm, and female experience as a sex-specific deviation from that norm. It is thus not that man is treated as superior and woman as inferior but that man is treated as human and woman as other" (Bem 2). In Neelakantan's retelling, this view is clear in the societal and internalized hierarchies that affect both Nala and Damayanti. When society builds its institutions, values, and expectations around the idea of "male-as-default," both men and women face challenges when they cannot meet strict standards. Women encounter devaluation, limited choices, and social backlash for expressing independence or ambition. Meanwhile, men experience emotional repression and fear vulnerability, as they associate masculinity with dominance and control. These hierarchies restrict the full range of human experience, leading to psychological distress and inequality. Nala feels inadequate because of his as a Nishada; this shows how society determines status based on patriarchal standards. For instance, Nala thinks about his caste: "I am a Nishada," Nala said softly. "Here, in this holy land, all that matters is one's birth. And I am born in the wrong caste" (Neelakantan 38). Damayanti also faces limitations due to androcentric structures, like divine interference in her swayamvara, where gods try to influence her

choice: "I am Indra, the King of Gods,' the silver-skinned one said, 'and the one you pecked is Agni deva, the God of fire. The dark-skinned one is Yama, the God of death'" (Neelakantan 52). Despite these pressures, Damayanti challenges androcentric authority by recognizing Nala among the gods, claiming her right to make her own decisions: "Then she saw it. There were beads of sweat forming on the forehead of one Nala. ... only one of the four had a shadow—the same one who was sweating" (Neelakantan 73-74). Through these examples, the retelling critiques male-centered societal norms and highlights the female perspective in decision-making, showing resistance to androcentrism.

Gender polarization exaggerates the differences between men and women. It defines what is seen as acceptable behaviour, appearance, or role for each gender. Bem explains that gender polarization organizes social life by setting male and female roles as opposite and separate categories where she states that "women and men are fundamentally different from one another but the more subtle and insidious use of that perceived difference as an organizing principle for the social life of the culture. It is thus not simply that women and men are seen to be different but that this male-female difference is super imposed on so many aspects of the social world that a cultural connection is thereby forged between sex and virtually every other aspect of human experience, including modes of dress and social roles and even ways of expressing emotion (Bem 2). In Neelakantan's retelling, these expectations appear in Nala's and Damayanti's experiences. Nala is expected to show heroic masculinity, competence, and control, particularly as king, husband, and master of the dice game. However, his ongoing self-doubt reveals the weight of these social norms. He expresses, "No, she is not my possession to stake, she is my ardhangani, the half of my body, the whole of my soul" (Neelakantan 99). He grapples with his low-caste status, admitting, "I am not good enough for her" (55). When faced with divine intervention, he feels inferior and Hemanga states, "saw indecision, fear, insecurity and his sense of inferiority-all parade in succession through Nala's face" (58). He acknowledges the limitations society places on him "By loving me—someone born in the womb of a forest dweller—the princess will only invoke the wrath of Gods" (39).

In contrast, Damayanti constantly defies strict gender expectations by showing courage, resourcefulness, and moral authority. She faces life-threatening situations with determination, as when she "stomped her right foot forward, gripped the hunter by his armpit, and flipped him above her head" (129), or when she tackles the dangers of the forest. Damayanti also expresses her emotional and moral independence by showing loyalty and love regardless of societal pressure: "'Wherever my husband is, that is my home.' 'I didn't marry you because you are the King of the Nishadas. I married you because I love you'" (107). She actively chooses Nala during the second swayamvara, declaring, "Before anyone could react, she put the garland on Nala's shoulders and hugged him tightly. With a voice choking with emotion, she turned to her father and said, 'I have chosen my husband, Nala'" (197). Through Nala's vulnerability and Damayanti's bravery, the retelling illustrates Bem's observation of gender polarization. It shows that traditional social roles are made up and can

be challenged, emphasizing the importance of resisting strict gender norms in the present society.

Biological essentialism presents gender inequalities as natural, unchanging, or determined by biology. Bem argues that biological essentialism legitimates gender inequality by asserting that observed differences between the sexes arise from biological destiny where she states that “biological essentialism, documents and exposes the longstanding tendency of biological theorists to naturalize the social and economic inequalities between the sexes—to make them seem natural and inevitable rather than historically constructed and modifiable—which they do by overemphasizing biology and under emphasizing the historical and contemporary social context (Bem 4). One of the most celebrated anthropologists to explore these differences was Margaret Mead, whose research in the South Seas (Samoa, Polynesia, Indonesia) remains, despite some significant criticism, an example of engaged scholarship, clear writing, and important ideas. Mead was clear that sex differences are “not something deeply biological,” but rather are learned and, once learned, become part of the ideology that continues to perpetuate them. Here's how she put it: “I have suggested that certain human traits have been socially specialized as the appropriate attitudes and behaviours of only one sex, while other human traits have been specialized for the opposite sex. This social specialization is then rationalized into a theory that the socially decreed behaviours is natural for one sex and unnatural for the other, and that the deviant is a deviant because of a glandular defect or developmental accident.” (Kimmel 59). In Neelakantan's version, similar patterns emerge in societal hierarchies and caste differences that shape Nala's perceived worth. Nala's low-caste birth and his change into the dwarf Bahuka act as culturally “naturalized” markers of inferiority: “I want her to forsake you. I want her to say, she can't live with an ugly dwarf who does not own even a loincloth to cover his shame. Live and suffer, Nishada. That is Kali's blessing for you” (Neelakantan 122). Despite these seemingly predetermined markers of social and physical status, the story challenges essentialist beliefs. Damayanti refuses to leave Nala, highlighting love and personal choice over caste and appearance: “Wherever my husband is, that is my home.’ I didn't marry you because you are the King of the Nishadas. I married you because I love you” (107). Moreover, Nala's restored form and kingdom after winning the dice game show that social and moral skills, intelligence, and personal virtue are not limited by biology or caste. Through these actions, the retelling disrupts the idea that hierarchical or gender inequalities are biologically determined. This supports Bem's argument by showing that gender and social constructs are flexible rather than fixed.

Conclusion:

This study explored Anand Neelakantan's *Nala and Damayanti: An Eternal Story of Mahabharata* using Sandra Bem's *The Lenses of Gender*. It highlighted how male-centered views, gender differences, and biological ideas shape our understanding of masculinity and femininity. The story shows Nala's struggles with self-doubt and societal pressures. It also depicts Damayanti's bravery, cleverness, and moral strength. Together, they illustrate that both men and women face limitations due to social hierarchies. Their decisions, resilience, and shared love challenge strict norms. This reveals that personal goodness and emotional

insight go beyond set gender roles by linking classical mythology to modern issues like inequality, caste, and social expectations. It encourages the ideas to question hierarchies, reflect on gender, and highlights the transformative power of choice and agency for everyone.

Limitations and Scope:

This study has a few limitations. It focuses only on one retelling, Nala, and Damayanti, which may not capture the entire range of feminist reinterpretations of mythologies. The analysis primarily relies on reading the text and Sandra Bem's theoretical framework. It does not include empirical data, audience reactions, or comparisons with other adaptations. While the study discusses caste and gender hierarchies, it does not examine other social factors like class, ethnicity, or regional differences in detail. Despite these drawbacks, the study still holds significant scholarly value. It shows how feminist retellings of mythology can challenge deep-rooted gender norms, present both male and female viewpoints, and inspire current discussions about agency, equality, and moral responsibility. This framework can also be applied to analyse other side-lined mythologies. It lays the groundwork for comparing classical and modern legends and highlights literature's ability to connect ancient epics with today's social ideas, prompting reflections on gender, caste, and the impact of individual choices.

Declaration:

I declare that the work submitted for publication is original, previously unpublished in English or any other language(s), and not under consideration for publication elsewhere. I also certify that all the authors have approved the paper for release. The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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