
Queer Theory Perspectives In The Mahabharata

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Abstract

This paper examines how the *Mahabharata* can be read through the lens of queer theory, focusing on the ways it challenges fixed ideas of gender, sexuality, and identity. Drawing on key concepts from Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the study looks closely at characters and episodes that move beyond heteronormative frameworks. Figures like Shikhandi—born female but later living as male—and Arjuna’s transformation into Brihannala during exile offer compelling examples of gender fluidity and identity as performance. The story of Amba/Shikhandi, in particular, raises important questions about desire, agency, and transformation that resist rigid categorization.

Using a textual and interpretive approach, the paper engages selected episodes from the epic alongside contemporary queer theory. It argues that the *Mahabharata* not only reflects diverse identities but also provides space for their expression in ways that challenge modern assumptions about precolonial Indian society. By reading these narratives through a queer lens, the paper highlights the relevance of indigenous texts in current discussions on identity and inclusivity. Ultimately, it positions the *Mahabharata* as a valuable resource for rethinking the origins and scope of queer discourse beyond a solely Western framework.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Queer Theory, Gender Fluidity, Identity Performance
Heteronormativity

Introduction

The Mahabharata is huge, messy, and does not fit into neat categories. People have been pondering this for ages, mostly focusing on duty and family drama or weighing its complex moral choices. If you have been involved in academic debates, you will notice that scholars tend to treat gender and sexuality as locked-in facts—like everyone just slots naturally into whatever role they are assigned.

But queer theory turns that upside down. ([Denton, 2023](#); [Hooper, 2018](#); [Mahabharata Now, 2017](#)) Instead of seeing gender and sexuality as fixed, it treats them as cultural inventions. Male/female, straight/gay? Those aren't preordained truths; they're social scripts. So the Mahabharata starts to look like a stage for constant change—identities shifting, lines blurring, nothing ever truly nailed down.

This first chapter is about laying the groundwork. Queer theory throws around concepts like gender as a kind of performance, fluid identity, and messy, restless desire. The chapter connects these ideas to the Indian context, and argues that queer readings aren't just some modern twist—they actually unearth layers the text already hides.

At the center of queer theory is the refusal to treat identity as permanent. The old approach expects gender and biology to line up, and assumes desire follows a tidy, straight line. Queer theory throws out the rulebook: gender behaves like a costume, and desire goes wherever it feels like. Suddenly, the Mahabharata doesn't just reflect reality—it becomes a workshop where identity gets rebuilt as the story unfolds.

([Demir, 2023](#); [Karczmarczyk & Gonzalez, 2020](#); [Luthra, 2014](#); [Pattanaik, 2014, 2019](#))

Take gender performativity. Here, gender isn't something you simply "are"—it's something you "do." Through daily habits, gestures, and rituals, people manufacture the illusion of gender stability. Culture sets the boundaries, but individuals can bend the rules—or even snap them. The Mahabharata is full of role-switching and characters who don't fit the usual molds.

And desire? Queer theory doesn't buy the idea that it's straightforward, or always follows the heterosexual pattern. Desire is tangled up in closeness, friendship, longing, and sometimes blurs into something tougher to name. If you look closely, the Mahabharata is packed with relationships that don't stick to the scripts.

Identity itself is slippery. In queer theory, it's built—shaped by traditions, institutions, and stories. The epic's cast is always trading places, reinventing themselves, and fitting new roles as their worlds shift.

Reading the Mahabharata through queer theory isn't just about pasting today's labels onto ancient characters. It's about cracking open new ways of seeing, and discovering meanings that have always simmered beneath the surface. These readings don't flatten the story—they give it energy, showing just how many possibilities live inside the lines.

The culture behind the Mahabharata already embraced ambiguity and change. Indian mythology is full of gods who shape-shift, people who swap forms, and rules that flex. The epic just fits in—it never locks down categories, it leaves space for all kinds of

identities.

Stories don't just mirror society—they help shape it. The Mahabharata doesn't merely reflect what people think; it influences those values. If you read the story with queer theory, you'll find meanings that challenge the official readings, and open the door to alternatives.

Another trick queer theory teaches is to pay attention to what's missing. Quiet moments, sudden contradictions, little slips—these hint at bigger questions around power and identity. In the Mahabharata, when someone changes appearance or reverses their role, something's going on behind the scenes.

Bringing queer theory to the epic has ripple effects—it busts the myth that nontraditional identities are new or Western imports. The Mahabharata, with its fuzzy gender and complicated relationships, proves these experiences are ancient and human, not foreign or modern.

This method values diversity. The Mahabharata isn't frozen or one-note. It's been retold endlessly, and every version stacks up new meanings. Queer theory is just one layer in this tradition.

Some critics worry that modern frameworks distort old texts. But honestly, every interpretation is shaped by context—traditional readings included. Queer theory isn't the official answer; it's just another way to dig deeper.

It's not about slapping labels on characters, but about tracking how the story flirts with difference and shifting identities. Queer theory opens paths, letting us spot new patterns instead of locking down meaning.

Power and conformity are big, too. Queer theory asks who holds sway, who's pushed aside. The Mahabharata links gender and power all the time, making us think about how norms get made and changed.

This chapter is just the beginning. Soon, we'll dive into specific characters and scenes. The goal is simple: show that the Mahabharata isn't just deep—it's a living, changing text where identity gets stretched, challenged, and rebuilt.

In the end, queer theory doesn't just break old binaries. It reminds us identity and meaning never hold still. The Mahabharata stays active, always shifting, and right in the thick of modern debates.

Chapter 2: Gender Fluidity and Transformation in the Mahabharata

Devdutta Pattanaik's works—particularly **Shikhandi: And Other Tales They Don't Tell You** (2014) and **The Pregnant King** (2008)—offer accessible, nuanced readings of gender transformation and fluidity in Indian mythology, including the

Mahabharata. Pattanaik's interpretations highlight the epic's embrace of ambiguity and multiplicity, supporting the idea that non-normative identities and roles are intrinsic to Indian storytelling traditions. His analysis is especially valuable for understanding Shikhandi and Brihannala as central figures in discussions of gender and power, not merely as exceptions or marginal cases. For further reading, see Pattanaik, 2014 and Pattanaik, 2008.

Looking through a queer lens, the Mahabharata's stories of gender fluidity don't feel like afterthoughts—they're front and center. Gender isn't locked to biology; it's up for grabs, shaped and reshaped by the social and ethical swirl of the storyline. These changes aren't rare—they're woven right into the plot.

Let's start with gender performativity. If identity is built by repeating acts, then all those disguises and role-swaps in the epic matter. Without stable essence, identity shifts with the flow—vows reboot destiny, curses twist bodies, strategies break old molds. Everyone's negotiating their role, not just acting out a set pattern.

2.1 Shikhandi: Transgression, Recognition, and Gender Politics

Shikhandi's story is key. More than just a character changing gender, Shikhandi triggers big social and political effects. Born Shikhandini, raised as a man, out for vengeance—the journey isn't simple. After a magical trade with a yaksha, Shikhandini gets a male body and becomes Shikhandi.

This isn't just a fairy-tale swap. It's about how bodies and social acknowledgment interact. Shikhandi's status rests not only on physical change but on how people treat him. Bhishma's refusal to fight Shikhandi, because of his birth assignment, shows how unstable gender rules really are. Even when Bhishma sticks to the norms, he admits they don't fit perfectly.

Queer theory cares about the clash between assigned sex, lived identity, and social acceptance. Shikhandi blows up the idea of easy alignment. If gender were fixed, this transformation wouldn't fly. If it were just performance, resistance wouldn't matter. The Mahabharata pulls at these threads, making gender a mix of body, story, community, and ethics.

Shikhandi isn't a side character; he's at the center, especially with Bhishma's downfall. The epic doesn't just squeeze him in—it lets him flip the plot. Claims that masculinity is steady and uniform fall apart; strength and action come from the places you least expect.

Past lives (as Amba) fold gender change into justice and revenge. Identity isn't only about the present—it stretches across lifetimes. That process, weaving through history

and storytelling, smashes the idea of a fixed self.

2.2 Arjuna as Brihannala: Gender Performance and Skill

If Shikhandi is all about transformation, Arjuna as Brihannala is pure performance. In exile, Arjuna becomes a eunuch dance teacher, switching his look, his speech, his job, his attitude. He throws himself into traditionally feminine skills, making the role convincing.

Arjuna doesn't hide behind a "true" gender. He performs, gets recognized, and the court accepts him. His courage and talent don't disappear—they just shift. Valor isn't reserved for masculinity; intelligence and discipline cut across all lines.

The way others respond matters. Identity is born in the dance between Arjuna's performance and the community's recognition. Gender is never a solo act—it needs a stage, an audience, a society willing to play along.

When Arjuna go back to his warrior self, the shift is seamless. The story doesn't insist on one essence; it's happy with fluidity. Roles change, context guides identity.

2.3 Disguise, Vow, Curse: Changing Identity in the Epic

Disguises, vows, and curses—these are the epic's favorite tools for rewriting identity. The Pandavas' secret year, Bhishma's celibacy, supernatural twists—all create room for the self to be edited and reinvented.

Identity is always up for negotiation. Choices, forces, limits—all shape but never totally decide the outcome. Characters keep pushing at those boundaries.

2.4 Recognition and the Limits of Norms

Recognition comes up again and again. Who gets to decide if an identity is real? Shikhandi's warrior status, Brihannala's place in the court, Bhishma's refusals—they hinge on others' judgments, never on any final rule.

Norms are shown as just a patchwork—they're debated, interpreted, and shift with the moment. Gender isn't settled; it's battled over.

That fits queer theory's skepticism perfectly. Norms look solid, but the Mahabharata keeps showing they're paper-thin.

2.5 Power, Agency, and Malleable Masculinity

These transformations aren't just for show—they change outcomes. Shikhandi helps end the war; Brihannala protects the family. The epic says breaking gender rules can make you stronger, not weaker.

But it's all about balance. The Mahabharata respects some traditions, tweaks others. Masculinity flexes—it can pause, restart, reshape itself.

There's no single script. The epic keeps options open, and that's why queer

readings fit—it leaves plenty of room for movement and meaning.

2.6 Finishing Thoughts: A Queer Approach to the Mahabharata

Bottom line, the Mahabharata—thanks to Shikhandi, Brihannala, and a roster of shape-changers—shows identity is always flexible. It’s built on bodies, stories, and recognition. This isn’t just academic—these shifts drive power, change the action, and push the narrative in new directions. All in all, it’s a treasure trove for queer theory to explore.

Before:

Queer Theory Perspectives in the Mahabharata

Chapter 1: Introduction and Conceptual Framework

The Mahabharata—massive, complex, impossible to pin down—has been read for centuries as a story of duty, justice, and family drama. Most scholars dive into its ethical codes or its tangled dynastic wars, focusing on moral dilemmas and religious meaning. Yet these traditional views often treat gender and sexuality as fixed categories, hardly questioning if identity has deeper layers or shifting contours.

That’s where queer theory comes in. This late-twentieth-century framework shakes up the standard binaries—male/female, heterosexual/homosexual—by treating them as products of culture, not nature. With queer theory in hand, the Mahabharata morphs into a text of constant negotiation, transformation, and ambiguity. Suddenly, identity isn’t anchored; it moves, adapts, and slips out of easy labels.

This chapter sets the stage to see the epic through queer theory, introducing core ideas like gender performativity, fluid identity, and the unruliness of desire. It places these concepts within Indian cultural and philosophical traditions and insists that queer readings aren’t just modern overlays—they dig up possibilities already buried in the text.

At its heart, queer theory refuses the idea that identity is set in stone. The old way—assuming gender matches biology, assuming desire follows a tidy, heterosexual path—gets upended. Instead, gender becomes performance and desire escapes fixed boundaries. Now texts like the Mahabharata take on new meaning: not as mirrors of reality, but as sites where identity gets built, taken apart, and rebuilt.

One cornerstone of queer theory is gender performativity. Here, gender isn’t something someone “is.” It’s something someone “does.” Daily actions, gestures, traditions—these make up the illusion that gender is stable. Culture sets the boundaries, but individuals can (and do) bend, stretch, or outright break the rules. Look at the Mahabharata: characters shift gender roles all the time, acting in ways that don’t fit neat boxes.

And what about desire? Queer theory waves away the idea that it’s simple or

strictly heterosexual. Desire is tangled, hard to categorize—friendships and attachments often blur into something more, something different. That ambiguity is all over the Mahabharata, where deep bonds refuse to fit into the standard scripts.

Identity itself, in queer theory, is constructed—not a fixed trait, but a product of histories, institutions, and stories. The epic’s sprawling cast and ever-changing roles embody this idea. Characters don’t just play their part—they negotiate new ones, shed old skins, and transform within their circumstances.

Reading the Mahabharata through a queer lens isn’t about forcing modern sexuality onto ancient tales. It’s about using contemporary tools to crack open patterns and meanings that echo with the same questions. These readings don’t flatten the epic; they animate it, letting us see just how flexible and layered it really is.

Importantly, the culture that produced the Mahabharata was already comfortable with ambiguity. Indian myths thrive on transformation and multiplicity—gods shift shapes, people change forms, boundaries slip and slide. The epic fits right in, not policing identity but leaving space for fluidity.

Stories themselves build social norms. The Mahabharata doesn’t only reflect values; it forges them. By reading its stories through queer theory, we discover meanings that challenge the “official” readings, offering alternatives that defy the dominant codes.

Queer theory also teaches us to watch for absences—silent moments, contradictions, odd shifts that hint at something unsaid. In the Mahabharata, episodes of disguise and reversal subtly point toward questions of identity, power, and difference.

Bringing queer theory to the epic has larger implications too. It chips away at the myth that non-normative identities are recent or Western inventions. The Mahabharata, with its gender fluidity and ambiguous relationships, makes clear that these experiences are deeply human and ancient.

This approach underscores the value of plurality. The Mahabharata isn’t static—a single meaning carved in stone. It’s a living tradition, retold and reinterpreted through generations. Each reading adds a fresh layer, queer theory included.

Some worry that applying modern frameworks to old texts risks distortion or anachronism. Yet every interpretation is shaped by its time and place—traditional readings included. Queer theory doesn’t claim the “right” answer; it offers another way in, expanding our horizon.

The point isn’t to slap labels onto characters, but to explore how the text dances with identity and difference. Queer theory opens new pathways, letting us see patterns and possibilities rather than locking down meanings.

Power and normativity form another crucial piece. Queer theory investigates how some identities hold sway while others get sidelined. The Mahabharata puts power and gender in constant conversation, inviting us to study how norms are made, defended, and torn apart.

This chapter lays the groundwork for a deeper analysis. It prepares us to look at specific characters and stories in detail. The goal: to show that the Mahabharata isn't only philosophically profound—it's a site where identities get contested, stretched, and made anew.

In the end, bringing queer theory to the Mahabharata doesn't just challenge binaries. It reminds us that identity, meaning, and narrative are always in motion. The epic remains dynamic—open, evolving, and right at home in contemporary debates.

Chapter 2: Gender Fluidity and Transformation in the Mahabharata

Approached through queer theory, the Mahabharata's scenes of gender fluidity and transformation become central, not peripheral. Gender here isn't a fixed trait tethered to biology. The epic unfolds through moments where gender is assumed, suspended, or reshaped—driven by social, ethical, and political forces. This isn't a sideshow; these shifts are integral to the plot.

Let's root this analysis in gender performativity. When identity relies on repeated acts and recognitions, stories based on disguise and role-play become especially revealing. The Mahabharata is packed with these—vows rewriting destiny, curses changing bodies, strategic disguises breaking the mold. Identity isn't a stable essence; it's a position negotiated within shifting expectations.

2.1 Shikhandi: Transgression, Recognition, and the Politics of Gender

Shikhandi is central for queer readings—more than a character with a changed gender, they become a hinge for social and political consequences. Born Shikhandini (in some versions), raised as male, and destined for vengeance, the narrative arc is complex. Through an exchange with a yaksha, Shikhandini gains a male body and is recognized as Shikhandi.

At first glance, this transformation might seem miraculous, but a closer look reveals how embodiment and social recognition interact. Shikhandi operates as a warrior not just because of a new body, but because allies acknowledge him and opponents (chiefly Bhishma) accept that identity for ethical reasons. Bhishma's refusal to fight Shikhandi, based on birth assignment, highlights how gender norms are unstable—even when striving to uphold them, he admits gender isn't reducible to present embodiment.

Queer theory finds meaning in the gap between assigned sex, lived identity, and

social acceptance. Shikhandi unsettles any easy alignment of these categories. If gender were deterministic, transforming recognition from female to male would be impossible; if performative, resistance like Bhishma's wouldn't matter. The epic stages these tensions, showing gender as layered—body, history, validation, and ethics all interact.

Shikhandi isn't peripheral; he's pivotal. His involvement in Bhishma's fall gives non-normative gender identities starring roles in the war's turning point. The Mahabharata doesn't just include him—it makes him decisive, complicating any claim that masculinity is single and stable. Power and agency emerge from places that break the usual rules.

Memory and past lives (as Amba) connect gender transformation to justice and vengeance. Identity flows not just across the present, but across lifetimes. This processual identity, shaped by time, narrative, and recognition, undermines the idea of a fixed self.

2.2 Arjuna as Brihannala: Performance, Skill, and the Suspension of Masculinity

Shikhandi is transformation; Brihannala (Arjuna in disguise) is performance. During the Pandavas' exile, Arjuna becomes a eunuch dance instructor—changing dress, speech, occupation, and manner. As gender performativity goes, this is rich material: Arjuna masters feminine-coded skills, adopting a role that's believable and sustained.

Success here isn't about hiding a "true" gender; it's about consistently performing and being accepted by the court. Arjuna's heroism isn't lost—it just shifts. His martial skills stay intact, ready to resurface. There's no simple equation of masculinity with valor or femininity with weakness; traits like courage, discipline, and intelligence transcend gender.

Spectatorship matters. Identity emerges in the interplay between Arjuna's performance and the court's recognition. Gender is negotiated, never just expressed, always reliant on codes intelligible to others and institutions that enforce or relax those codes.

Arjuna's transition back to warrior is smooth, revealing narrative willingness to accommodate multiplicity. He's not a single essence, but a repertoire of identities. Context shapes roles; identity adapts.

2.3 Disguise, Vow, and Curse: Narrative Strategies for Gender Reconfiguration

The epic is full of mechanisms—disguises, vows, curses—that rework identity. The Pandavas' incognito year, Bhishma's vow of celibacy, supernatural interventions—all create a narrative space where the self is continuously edited and rewritten.

These devices show identity isn't just chosen or imposed—it's negotiated within ethical, social, and divine constraints, yet remains open to change. Characters operate within limits, but those limits themselves shift and bend.

2.4 Social Recognition and the Limits of Normativity

All these episodes circle around recognition. Who gets to validate identity, and on what terms? Shikhandi's acceptance, Brihannala's standing, Bhishma's refusal—they depend on social judgments, none of which are uniform or final.

The variability exposes normativity as contingent, not absolute. Instead of clear-cut rules, the epic shows competing interpretations—birth, embodiment, social role. No single standard rules; gender is debated, contested.

This aligns perfectly with queer theory's skepticism. Norms appear natural, but the Mahabharata frequently reveals their fragility, especially in moments of conflict.

2.5 Power, Agency, and the Reconfiguration of Masculinity

These transformations have real stakes, not just symbolic ones. Shikhandi changes the war's direction; Brihannala ensures survival. The epic suggests that breaking gender norms can empower, not weaken.

But there's no simple reversal where all norms are tossed. The Mahabharata threads a careful path between respecting and reshaping them. Masculinity becomes flexible: it can be suspended, reconstituted, and even redefined.

Far from prescribing a single script, the epic keeps multiple options in play. That's how it's open to queer reading—it refuses closure, keeps possibility alive.

2.6 Synthesis: Toward a Queer Hermeneutics of the Epic

In sum, the Mahabharata, with Shikhandi, Brihannala, and countless reconfigurations, shows that identity is never set—it's always in flux, negotiated across bodies, histories, and social forms. This isn't just theoretical—it shapes action, power, and the course of narrative itself, making the epic a powerful text for queer analysis.

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