

Interpreting Spiritual Identity and Self-Discovery in *The Mahabharata* through an Underlying Shadow of Disability: Seeking Pragmatics of Robert Mcruer's *Crip Theory*.

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Abstract

Both central and marginalised characters from *The Mahabharata*, like Arjuna, Shikhandi, Draupadi, Bhishma, Dhritarashtra, Gandhari, Karna, Ekalavya, Dronacharya etc. are often limited to the interpretation of serving as a medium to the Kurukshetra War. Often the hermeneutics of narrating these characters as individuals, have been in ways, deferred or rather, overlooked. The postmodern eulogy of the meaning making process through the individualism, intersecting with the hegemonic connotations of social institutions, have rendered possibilities of redefining and relooking these archetypal stories in the light of individual conscience, imagined in the binary juxtaposition of ability and disability. The binary at the same time, gets deconstructed in critical evaluation of the same. McRuer's theory of the crip, interprets and re-analyses the conundrum and reality of being disabled, which contrary to popular belief, is a production, a manufacture of the social institutions. Aid and ailment perhaps oscillate into one another, and the awakening of the Self measured against the dogmatic intervention of society is the birth of the rupture of the binary between ableism and disability. This paper seeks to understand some characters of the canonical Indian Epic, *The Mahabharata* through McRuer's study of disability. This paper also attempts to look into these

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characters beyond the paradigms of psychological and physical disability, and the way they have been narrated in the epic, in the collocation of a postmodern quandary. In addition, in the vision of McRuer's theory, this paper will try to reread *The Mahabharata* in the interdisciplinary routes between Queerness and Disability.

Keywords:

Ableism; Individuality; Social Disability; *The Mahabharata*; Psychological Disability.

Introduction

*I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe,
and am not contain'd between my hat and boots,
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.*

*I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and
fathomless as myself,
(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)*

(Whitman 40)

Every search or quest for an identity has always been preceded by a crisis. What distinguishes the notion of a *spiritual identity* is the internalization of that crisis, often resulting from physical and psychological attributions of a polychromatic quandary. However, internalization often comes as a result of both intra and inter causes. The boundaries of what the self is how the self is perceived have in many ways merged and diverged.

*.....sense of identity is forged through the interaction of
individual characteristics and experiences with historically specific
societal mores, expectations, and opportunities, functioning to
provide "both a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness)*

and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others” (Erikson, 1980, p. 109). Thus, we define spiritual identity as a persistent sense of self that addresses ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in behaviors that are consonant with the individual’s core values. This definition differs to some extent from other definitions of spirituality in the developmental literature. (Kiesling et.al)

McRuer’s idea of *compulsory abledness* and *ableism* becomes a kaleidoscope of the modern perception of how experiences are nuances in the dissections of heteronormativity and the conundrum of subjective realities. The hegemonic and hierarchical interpretations of what and who is termed as ‘able’ and condemned as ‘disabled’ have furthermore been stances of scrutiny, in this same subjective reality where perceptions and hermeneutics of a situation and experiential conditions differ from one another.

This is not to say that the relationship between crip theory and abledness has been unscrutinised. There are multiple instances in the crip theory canon that consider the relationship between crip theory and abledness. Part of the crip political project has involved challenging the hegemony (and compulsoriness) of abledness, interrogating the co-constitutive relationship between abledness and disabledness, and exploring the ethics and politics of claiming crip (McRuer 2006). Crip’s capaciousness as a positionality, as opposed to an identity, opens up possibilities, claims, tensions, and misunderstandings within and beyond the disability community..... (Kiesling et al)

In this paper, I seek to explore the nuances of exploring an epic like The Mahabharata, which is a tale surpassing a varied array of classical and folk traditions, through the idea of disability as structured by McRuer, in the intersections of

psychological and situational conundrum, measured against the archetypal construct of 'disability'.

Discussion and Analysis

The Mahabharata is divided into eighteenth parvas, or sections which again have a multitude of subsections. What makes the Mahabharata, an epic beyond the trajectories of tradition is the individualism which it portrays, where every character becomes a semblance of critical jurisdiction and complex identity paradigms. For the aim of this paper, I shall take a character from some of the parvas to disseminate the theory of crip, according to McRuer.

From the Adiparva, I take Satyavati, or the fisherwoman who has been accused by the society in the ideas of greed and ego, for Bhishma's plight. Satyavati, a marginalized woman since her birth identified as the "fish-smelling daughter" (Vyasa 127) often parallels between the extremities and bipolarities of Rishi Parasara and King Shantanu, between Vyasa and Chitrangada and/or Vichitravirya. The marginalization of her body as objectified by the smell of fish, which is later swept away by a man not because it was essential for her to be accepted by the society, but because he wanted to "embrace" her, becomes a sight of social disability running through gender and class. Satyavati's constant anxiety or fear of her child being abandoned by the bourgeoisie (Ganga, who was a Goddess as a binary to her being a fisherwoman) wife and her son (Bhishma) exfoliates the deep embedding of the society to marginalize and exclude. The question remains- was it Satyavati's greed or the society's failure? Satyavati's character becomes disabled here in gaining a secured sense of belonging throughout the narrative, by virtue of the social institutions and structures underlying.

McRuer seems to think of crip theory not as a fixed and delimited field but as a collection of positions, practices and perspectives against compulsory able-bodiedness, compulsory heterosexuality, and their intersections...

(McRuer 68)

On the idea of heteronormativity and heterosexuality in the basements of the crip theory, I tend to bring the fluid character transgression of Amba to Shikhandi from the Sabha parva, which although been depicted as the same entity two bodies

across two births, also explores an individual's agency to choose his/her/their gender, in order to defy Bhishma, who becomes a symbol of patriarchal misogyny here. Shikhandi, represents the liminal space, who does not get a choice of their own in their previous birth as Amba for the sake of Bhishma maintaining his own vow. Shikhandi, again becomes an agent of queer transcendence in becoming a sibling to Drishtadyumna and Draupadi, both identifying in the binaries of a male-female dichotomy. Neither Amba who has a female body (abiding the societal gender norms) nor Shikhandi who identifies as a transgender (defying the societal gender norms) is accepted by the society, but what remains as a plot of resistance is that Shikhandi fulfills the promise which Amba made before burning herself to death symbolic of as taking agency of her own body.

“Home” became a site where stability and emotional satisfaction could supposedly be found—no longer a place of interdependency for survival, home became a site where gender roles and expectations were clear (and increasingly-rigidified) and where heterosexual relations (and eventually “heterosexuality” itself) thereby appeared entirely natural.

(McRuer 167)

From the Vana parva, Eklavya's character is a vehement body of political disability. Drona's refusal to teach Eklavya who was a citizen from the rival state of Kuru-rashtra, comes from his political loyalty to the same Kururashtra. In addition to that, the exploitation and marginalization of a supposed caste, class and tribe also becomes intrinsic. The events show how marginalization and disability are often not external, but are internal state agencies to perpetrate an imbalanced classification of the society. The idea of education, being a political agent and knowledge being a discourse also comes here in the act of Eklavya being refused by Dronacharya. Eklavya's cutting of his thumb, as demanded by Drona, becomes symbolic of the bridge between psychological and physical disability, often aided by the dynamics of power.

Uttara, from the Virata parva, substantiates and challenges the traditional rigidity assigned to the idea of masculinity, and especially for the males who come from a ruling dynasty, to be prophesized as warriors. Uttara, is not the man, as he must be as he is timid and soft which are qualities only reserved for women, by the society. Hence, he becomes traditionally disabled as a male. Brihannala's character is a paramount figure of importance here who does not transform Uttara, but rather makes him accept himself in his identity. Interestingly, Brihannala is Arjuna disguised as a trans- Arjuna, who is the most celebrated masculine hero of the epic. Arjuna accepts himself as a trans with the help of Krishna, by virtue of Chitrangada's curse. I shall come to Krishna who symbolizes and contextualizes and concludes all complexities of the characters and the abledness of the war, in the end.

Dhritirashtra's physical disability is underwhelmed by his psychological disability, in the Udyoga parva of the Mahabharata, where he is confronted by his fear and bondages regarding the plight of his sons. His constant seeking of the questions and counsels on eternity, life and death paralleled with his attachments to his sons and his failure as a father to morally, physically and spiritually save them explicates the deep tendencies of the human mind to juxtapose insecurity and liberation, in the same wheel. Dhritirashtra's physical disability hindered and excluded him socially, but he challenged the society through his heightened sense of wisdom and strength despite being blind. On the other hand, his mental disability rendered him helpless in insecurity his strength and wisdom failed him. The paradox of fabricating the individual's mind through societal expectations and manipulating the society through an individual's insecurity remains constant as a form of disability.

From Bhishma parva, I go forward with Dronacharya's character who comes from an upper class, who is a teacher teaching the children of kings and rulers but who is dependent on the rulers for his livelihood. His agony of failing to provide his son a glass of milk transcends into his idea of revenge on his friend, Drupad. Despite having an upper caste, he does not belong to the upper class which shows the criticalities of the society. He is marginalized by his friend, but somewhere in the plot, he also becomes the perpetrator in denying education to Eklavya, in aiding the cruelties of the war because of his attachment to his son, in failing to take agency over the thing he possessed- knowledge. Thus, Dronacharya is disabled and crippled in the sense that he

denies himself the existence of transcendence, despite being in the knowledge producing structure of the society. Eklavya cuts his finger effortlessly for knowledge, but Drona is unable to cut off his attachment with his son, which also questions the idea of giving and receiving knowledge.

Karna, from the Karna parva is perhaps one of the most sympathized characters of the epic. What makes him as an object of disability is his failure to draw the boundary between being the victim and being the perpetrator of the society. Karna is marginalized, and has always been in an absence of receiving what he needs- motherhood, acceptance, knowledge, love and compassion. He is abandoned by Kunti, denied by the society, rejected by Drona, insulted by Draupadi and exploited by Indra. Karna has also been the one to not “choose” to break his promise of loyalty which he gave to his friend, Duryodhana. Karna has also been the one who did not support but neither resented Abhimanyu’s volatile murder, he has also been the one who was an audience to the disrobing of Draupadi, supporting the Kauravas. Karna’s disability lies in his absence of taking individual agency, even when he had the choice to do that. It must also not be forgotten that Karna was a marginalized character since his childhood, which may also give rise to his anxiety and fear of being marginalized again by the only one who had extended his hand of friendship- Duryodhana. The quandary remains in the fact that Karna does not end the cyclical abhorrence but takes part in reproduction of the same structure.

Gandhari from the Stree parva is one of the many feminine characters who contribute majorly to the idea of social and psychological disability explored in the epic. While Gandhari is shown as a woman who chooses to take the blindfold, it must also be reminded that this woman did not have the privilege of knowing that her to be husband was blind. It must be questioned whether Gandhari had her will of marriage. Gandhari’s blindfold oscillates between interpretations of surrender on one hand, and as an act of resilience and defiance on the other hand. This also becomes a sight of limiting oneself, or a sense of self imposition of disability, as an act of challenging the celebrated idea of physical abled-ness.

As a character of moral disability, comes Yudhisthirha from Shanti parva, who is the epitome of Dharma as the society labels him, but fails to overcome his rigidity of what he thinks as right. Yudhisthirha is a character who rejects fluidity, and hampers the whole idea of Dharma, which means existential uphold. Yudhisthirha as the eldest child is perhaps pressurized by the society to take Pandu's legacy forward and through this process, he loses his ability to truly explore himself and the society. He is constantly guarded by his psyche to act "right" but he fails to understand the hermeneutics of righteousness in individual and collective consciousness. Thus, Yudhisthirha is a crippled character who possesses conflicts and crisis but rejects their existence in order to be right.

From the Anushasana parva, I take Vidura, is a character having more intellectual and administrative prowess than both Dhritirashtra and Pandu, but is denied the opportunity of reigning because of his social status and position in the court. He is someone in whose house Krishna goes and eats, symbolic of his ability to provide fulfillment which Dhritirashtra, the king and his step brother never possessed. He becomes a victim of the capitalistic society, in his position in the court as a minister, given the fact that he was capable of being the king. Vidura's character becomes a figure of intellectual disability aided by the exploitative structure in the sense that his unconventional and diasporic wisdom was a challenge to the established knowledge and power dynamics of the society.

Arjuna, who is the quintessential protagonist of the epic explores a deep hiatus of disability, which I shall explore now. He is given the role of Brihannala by Krishna, which he hesitates at first by virtue of his learnings about gender and performativity, but later accepts because of Krishna who becomes an agent of unlearning and deconstruction for Arjuna. In this factor, Arjuna was limiting himself in spaces of gender disability. Before the Kurukshetra War, Arjuna is faced with a turmoil of intellectual, moral and psychological inability which comes from his loss of self-esteem and rigidity to the structures he has been in. Until Krishna becomes the force of deconstructing the universe and the cosmos, and the individual conscience, Arjuna remains in the idea of self-rejection. Even in the war, impulsive decisions of killing Jayadrata before sunset showcases his inability to look beyond the circumstantial

hemisphere of his mindset. Arjuna is henceforth a character of constant psychological disability.

I continue with Draupadi from the Mahaprasthanika parva, who must share an equal square of being the protagonist with Arjuna. Her objectification is not only limited to the event of dice, but also beyond in the psychological layers of each of the characters in the epic except Krishna. She was seen as “not a son” by Drupada, as a promiscuous wife having five husbands, as a queen who became a bait, as a character who brought forth the war. Whatever she was seen as, it was never a woman. Krishna on the other hand, saw her neither as an object nor as a woman, but as a friend. She did not need Krishna’s revelation like Arjuna, in order to gain confidence, she simply needed Krishna’s support. She is a character who emerges from fire, symbolizing her meditation and wisdom but she was rendered in the spatiality of being a character who has been socially, sexually and psychologically disabled by the society.

In the last and the eighteenth parva, I shall look at the character of the dog which accompanies Yudhishthira to the end of his journey. The dog remains as a constant presence throughout the journey, unlike the other characters who one by one fall into the clutches of death. The dog represents a challenge to the idea of evolutionary ability and disability. Humans are supposed to be the most evolved and abled body of creatures as represented by the four Pandavas and Draupadi. But the dog surpasses them in its ability to accompany Yudhishthira, who is the symbol of Dharma here.

Lastly, I intend to bring two characters who go beyond any parvas and sections in their representations of polarities and existential conundrum- Shakuni and Krishna. Shakuni is the cunning mastermind behind the Kurukshetra war, who must also be seen in the idea of ableism and disability. He chooses to physically disable himself, as an act of defiance and as a reminder of taking revenge on Bhishma. He is also someone who is socially disabled because of his physical and administrative inferiority to Bhishma which leads him to his psychological obsession of manipulation and compulsion. He is perhaps one of the most complex characters representing both the

capitalist idea of ableism on one hand and resilience to this same structure by taking agency over not only himself, but also of the clan he wants to take revenge on.

Krishna, is the character who transcends all the binaries and dualities of ableism and disability, and accepts the characters not from the hegemonies of class, caste, gender and constructs but from the perspective of fluidity. Krishna becomes a friend to Arjuna and Draupadi, but in their own respective ways. He does not restrict himself to any one form, but expands himself into all forms and manifestations of the characters, resulting from his sense of cosmic consciousness. He rejects his belonging to any structure, promise or attachment, and goes beyond the parallels of societal institutions of what is interpreted as being able and what is considered as disabled. Krishna's character offers the paradigm of the beyond, disrupting normativity and binaries of presences and absences forged in by the social institutions. He merges himself and becomes one with every character, even Gandhari who curses him, with every conscience into expansion, but does not get extinguished.

Conclusions

The Mahabharata is a seminal text in Indian literature, rich with characters whose lives intertwine in the themes of power, duty, and destiny. Through the application of a disability studies lens, particularly Robert McRuer's crip theory, new dimensions of these characters emerge, challenging traditional readings.

Often regarded as a great cosmological tale, the epic can be understood also as a mini-cosmos of human experience with its physical, social, and psychological restrictions. Often tragic figures are Bhishma, Dhritarashtra, and Gandhari who have had physical disabilities; they have been considered to be a victim of destiny or curse of the god. A crip perspective lets us reimagine their experiences in a complex way. Their disabilities can be seen as both a source of limitation and a catalyst for personal growth and spiritual development.

In addition, the epic's exploration of gender roles and sexuality provides opportunities for a queer reading. Characters like Shikhandi and Ghatotkacha, who defy traditional gender norms, can be interpreted as queer figures, challenging the binary notions of masculinity and femininity.

Through the lens of disability and queer theory, we will be able to better understand the complex interplay between individual agency, societal structures, and the human condition. It is through this interdisciplinary approach that we are able to challenge traditional interpretations and appreciate the richness and diversity of the epic's characters. The Mahabharata, therefore, stands as a timeless text that continues to inspire and provoke thought and offers new insights into the human experience. I admit that I had overlooked at many characters which offer an extraordinary narrative of this theory, because of the constraint of time and space but I plan to expand my research in the future. With these words, I conclude in the hope that I look forward to merge new ideas into expansion, but not be extinguished in the process.

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