

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved:

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Informed by feminist and queer theories, this thesis provides an alternate reading of selected narratives from the Hindu epic “*Mahabharata*”. By queering the narratives from the epic, this thesis highlights the existence of fluid notions of sexuality and gender present within Hindu religious texts. In doing so, the study aims to nuance the dominant ideas on gender and sexuality held by Hindu society in Nepal to better understand both heteronormative and queer practices. This study also offers some reflections on how a queer feminist interpretation of Hindu religious texts such as *Mahabharata* can be used to subvert the heteronormativity present in Hindu socio-religious discourse.

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A Queer Feminist Interpretation of Selected Narratives from the *Mahabharata*: An
Analysis of Alternate Paradigms of Gender and Sexuality within the Epic

by
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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Sanju Gharti Chhetri G C, Author

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Chapter 1

1. Introduction:

I was born and raised in a traditional Hindu family in Nepal where Hindu values and traditions permeate our daily lives. Hinduism is engrained within the daily discourse of Nepali people, who represent the majority of Nepal's population. More than 80% of the Nepali population follows Hinduism (Nepal C.B.S., 2011). Hindu religion guides our way of living and dictates our outlook on life, practices, and the way we organize ourselves in relation to one another. A crucial component of following the Hindu religion is worshipping the Hindu deities and paying respect to them by engaging in various religious rituals at homes or in Hindu temples that exist across the country. As a religious Hindu woman, my mother frequents such temples on various religious occasions and festivals to worship the gods and goddesses. As a child, I often accompanied my mother on her religious tours and roamed around in the temples with her. There are numerous statues, sculptures, and idols of various deities throughout the temples of Nepal. They fascinated me. I would marvel at the structures, the people, and the ambience around these temples. Within the intricate designs and sculptures, I noticed various patterns and imagery that were explicitly sexual in nature. Gods, goddesses, and other living forms such as animals were often depicted as being engaged in various sexual acts. As an 11- or 12-year-old girl, I was curious about such motifs and as I pointed to the sculptures and asked my mother about them, she was quick to reprimand me for being "immoral" or "depraved" and forbade me from asking such questions; I was silenced.

This was how I learned that asking about or even mentioning issues of sex, or any topic related to sexuality for that matter, was taboo within my family and society. Such policing of language, interaction, and discourse in general, where there is any discussion or deliberation on

the issue of sexuality, is still stigmatized within the Hindu Nepali society. The interconnectedness that exists between the Hindu religion and sexuality and the ways in which religion determines the discourse on sexuality became evident to me over the years. For most Nepali Hindus, the broader discourse on gender and sexuality is bound up with the religious concepts of morality, chastity, *dharma*, heteronormativity, monogamy, marriage, and procreation. These normalized concepts, sanctioned within contemporary Nepali society, provide an overarching heteronormative framework for social institutions and processes such as family, marriage, gender, and sexuality (Francoeur & Noonan, 2004). This socio-religious establishment of heteronormative discourse governing sexuality and gender has resulted in the silencing, marginalization, and oppression of queer identities, sexuality, and practices in Nepal (Boyce & Coyle, 2013).

However, the belief that contemporary attitudes on sexuality and gender derive directly from Hindu religious discourse contradicts the sexual fluidity and queer manifestations present within the Hindu theology. Ancient Hindu religious scripts, idols, and sculptures found in historical temples and buildings in Nepal and India are replete with images and texts that transgress heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality. The Hindu religion is in fact grounded in themes of sexual and gender fluidity, where the blurring of gender binaries and the queering of sexuality contests the so-called ‘normal,’ ‘natural,’ and heteronormative practices that are predominant within contemporary Hindu societies, including Nepal. For instance, ancient Hindu epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are comprised of several tales that incorporate elements of queerness within the characters, subject matters, and storylines.

In this thesis, I explore the queer elements present within the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* and critically examine the epic’s narratives using a queer feminist lens. By offering a queer and

feminist interpretation of selected narratives from *Mahabharata*, I underscore the sexual and gender fluidity that exists in the epic and within Hindu religion in general. In doing so, I expose a paradox of contemporary Nepali Hindu society which inhibits and condemns the practice or discussion of sexual practices outside of heteronormativity, even as sexual fluidity is present in its ancient texts and philosophies.

Given that *Mahabharata* is part of the essential canon of Hinduism that guides the Hindu way of living and being (Narayan, 2000), providing a queer feminist analysis of this text allows me to nuance the dominant binary understandings and practices of sex, gender, and sexuality that are present within current Hindu society in Nepal. I also seek to challenge the all-too-common religious repression of queer bodies in Hindu societies both in India and Nepal by bridging Hindu religious discourse and queer bodies, sexualities, and gender. Employing a queer feminist analysis of the Hindu religious text *Mahabharata* enables me to look at the existing complexities within the practices of gender, sex, and sexuality that are dominant and largely believed to have been adhered to in accordance with Hindu mores and values whose foundations are deeply embedded in religious texts such as *Mahabharata*. By offering both dominant and alternate interpretations of the selected texts from *Mahabharata*, the study will hopefully open avenues for more meaningful discussions about queer identities and fluid notions of sexuality and gender in the context of Hindu societies in Nepal. Based on the queer feminist readings of *Mahabharata*, I highlight the importance of queering the dominant ideology and understandings of gender, sex, and sexuality in creating an equitable and inclusive environment for queer bodies residing in Hindu communities in Nepal and within the larger Hindu religious discourse today.

1.1 *Mahabharata*:

Mahabharata, which is one of two historic *Sanskrit* epics in Hinduism, and the longest epic poem written in any language, constitutes the primary text for this thesis. The research centers on the textual analysis of four selected narratives from this Hindu epic. Although there is no certainty regarding its authorship, *Mahabharata* is said to have been written by the sage Vyasa and is comprised of about 100,000 verses. It is generally thought to have been composed some 20 centuries ago (Narayan & Doniger, 2013). According to Vyasa, the epic is meant as “an exposition on life itself, including religion and ethics (*dharma sastra*), polity and government (*artha sastra*), philosophy and the pursuit of salvation (*moksa sastra*)” (Narasimhan, 1965, p. xix). The epic itself is about the victory of truth and the triumph of *dharma* over *adharma*. The chronicle has many intricate stories and details interlaced with history and mythology relating to the concept of *dharma*, the Hindu moral law, and has a rich conversation on life and conduct. The epic is considered the bedrock of Hindu values, beliefs, and traditions, and to this day it permeates the everyday lives of Hindus (Narayan, 2000). Over the centuries, there have been countless retellings of the epic which has been passed down from generation to generation through storytelling and the practice of oral history in various languages (Pattanaik, 2010). Within Hindu religious literature, *Mahabharata* is classified as *Itihasa*. *Itihasa* is not history, as is conventionally believed but rather “an account of life as it was, is, and always will be. *Itihasa* is that which is timeless or *sanatan*” (Pattanaik, 2010, p. 252).

The crux of the epic is the legendary battle of *Kurukshetra* and the rivalry of two family clans—the *Pandavas* (sons of Pandu) and the *Kauravas* (sons of Dhritarashtra)—who fight for the sovereignty of *Hastinapur* (Narayan & Doniger, 2013). There are numerous fables, episodes, and myths within the epic that directly or indirectly tie into the central theme of the story. Many

of these stories include queer elements which would be considered transgressive in contemporary Nepali society. However, there is seldom any discussion about these queer features that defy the heteronormativity present within the tales and the sexual activities which do not adhere to the rigid gender binaries and established codes of morality in dominant Hindu society. Such instances and stories of diversion from the established norms of gender and sexuality are rarely theorized from a feminist or queer perspective. Instead, the queer practices inherent within epics and larger spectrum of Hindu texts are often rationalized and theorized within religious discourse as ‘supernatural,’ ‘divine’ or ‘holy,’ whereby only gods are sanctioned to engage in and have the power to partake in these transgressions.

Mahabharata in the present-day Hindu society continues to serve as a living text whereby it is constantly recalled within Hindu discourse via oral traditions, storytelling, religious sermons, daily worships and rituals, performances, televised serials, radio programs, literary and translation works, scholarly and religious debates, writings, etc. It holds a significant place among the Hindus and has a great impact on them. Its meanings and interpretations are however mediated and are subject to constant renegotiation depending on the context, people, and their politics (Chakrabarti & Bandyopadhyay, 2017). For instance, the way *Mahabharata* is approached, interpreted, and employed by the right-wing Hindu nationalist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) is completely different than that of the transgender Hindus living in Koovgam village located in Tamil Nadu, the southern part of India. Although the philosophies and the belief systems of both parties have their origins in the *Mahabharata*, both groups uphold opposing ideals on the issue of gender and sexuality where the former endorses heteronormativity and the latter promotes queerness; this very clearly points to the opposing ideals and perspectives stemming out of the same religious text. This study, while referencing

such a paradox, attempts to juxtapose the existence of queer representations in *Mahabharata* with the current socio-cultural discourse that ostracizes queer behaviors and alternate forms of sexualities within dominant Nepali Hindu society. In doing so, the research aims to shed light on the socio-cultural construction and regulation of human sexuality and to critique the social norms that have been imposed on sexual practices over time which sanction heteronormative sexuality and situate queer, non-heteronormative practices that disrupt the gender binary as unnatural and deviant.

1.2 Dharma:

Dharma is a complex and abstract term for it carries diverse meanings in a wide array of contexts and has no absolute definition. However, the common denominators for *dharma* have been ethics, code of conduct, righteousness, duty, justice, and morality. *Dharma*, therefore, informs Hinduism.

The word ‘dhr’ in *dharma* means ‘to uphold’, and literally translates as ‘that which holds together’. *Dharma* means all the things that sustain and hold together creation in cosmological, social, and individual level. Whereas, *adharma* is the opposite, which means chaos. (Jacobs, 2010, p. 15)

It is as such that *dharma* has an emphasis on conduct and morality to give continuity to the social and individual order which has taken the form of norms, codes, and social order over the course of time. “*Dharma*, generally stated, a right and moral conduct, [is] the exercise of duty toward the human community” (Hacker, 2006, p. 480). Although the emphasis of *Dharma* has always been on ‘morality’, the domain of what is moral however remains unclear. It was only when one of the Hindu texts on *dharma*, the laws of Manu, was introduced, that rigid ideologies and roles

of *dharma* for Hindus were soon to follow. The laws of Manu designated specific roles and duties for a particular group of people based on the rigid caste-based systems. It also determined the ideal code of conduct and *dharma* for various social institutions and roles such as family, marriage, and reproduction to name only a few. It was from this code of conduct from which the binary of what is moral and immoral, right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, good and evil, *dharma* and *adharma* within Hinduism was produced. Such adherence to *dharma* is done with no immediate goals or motives in mind but with a hope to achieve salvation in the afterlife (Jacobs, 2010).

1.3 Organization of the Study:

This research has been conceptualized into five chapters. In this introductory chapter, I present the research topic and provide a background for this study. In the second chapter, I review the existing scholarship and research on feminist and queer readings of *Mahabharata*. I also discuss the issues of sexism, casteism, and classism that are present within *Mahabharata* and Hinduism. In the third chapter, I elaborate on textual analysis as my method for the research and explain the theoretical frameworks that inform this study. The fourth chapter provides a queer feminist textual analysis of texts from *Mahabharata*. The fifth chapter offers concluding observations, in which I discuss the findings and emphasize the need for queering and decolonizing Hindu interpretations, practices, and norms around gender and sexuality.

1.4 Background:

Any discussion on the issue of sexuality and gender in the context of Nepal is incomplete without taking the country's socio-cultural history, including India's colonial history, into account. Since Nepal is a part of the great Indian subcontinent, Hinduism, social norms, and colonialism have played a crucial role in determining the socio-cultural milieu of queer

communities in both India and Nepal. The colonial history within the great Indian subcontinent, India in particular, has made direct and indirect contributions to normalizing certain discourses around gender and sexuality as “normal” and socially acceptable, while simultaneously rendering others as socially unacceptable and therefore marginalizing alternative forms of gender and sexuality.

1.5 Hinduism and Heteronormativity in Nepal:

Sexual practices and norms are often a vital element of religious faith and values used as a means for regulating human sexuality. Theology and human sexuality go hand in hand as most religions connect sexual behavior to concepts of sanctity, morality, and decorum. A significant portion of religious doctrines focuses on moral, ethical, and even sexual behavior and etiquette, making the interplay of religion and sexuality evident (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2003). This focus on sexuality by many religions around the world might be explained by the key role sexuality plays in human interaction and social organization. Religion is used as a tool to control human sexuality, to force human sexual practices to conform to norms, and remain within boundaries that have been established to contain and regulate human sexual behaviors. As a result, sexuality becomes a vital element in the construction of religious meaning.

Ellingson & Green (2002) mention that in many religions, “sexual unions between male and female deities extend a theme that constructs certain sexual relationships as normative, and thus repetitive of the original moment of creation, and others as transgressive and potentially threatening to the cosmological order” (p. 2). Within Hinduism, sexual unions between certain deities hold a significant meaning where it clearly establishes the kind of relationships that are sanctioned within Hindu society which can be characterized by monogamy, heterosexuality, marriage, and procreation. For instance, *Radha & Krishna*, *Shiva & Parvati*, *Sita & Ram* are

some of the quintessential gods and goddesses in Hinduism who have had a great impact on Hindu discourse where said gods and goddesses are idolized and worshipped for their love and devotion for one another and their stories are so renowned that Hindus venerate and aspire to follow suit. Religious tales and myths like this play a crucial role in policing human sexuality whereby it gets translated into the daily discourse of people establishing certain relationships and interactions as legitimate and moral and other as illegitimate and sinful (Ellingson & Green, 2002).

Evidence of religion being used as a tool to stifle non-normative sexual practices and associating them with feelings of shame, guilt, stigma, and fear can be found within all mainstream religious practices (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2003). For instance, traditional western Christianity is known for its extremely conservative attitude towards human sexuality which idealizes celibacy and only tolerates sex for procreation. Although sex and sexuality are rarely discussed within both ancient Christian and Judaism scriptures, it clearly distinguishes the behaviors and practices that were acceptable and those which were not. For example, adultery, bestiality, homosexuality, sodomy, transvestism, masturbation, prostitution are some of the behaviors that were condemned whereas the practice of sex within the confines of marriage was accepted (Bullough, 1992). Christian establishments knew the importance of regulating human sexuality and the role it played in maintaining power and the status quo before the early modern period; hence, Christians were prohibited from marrying a Jew, Muslim or anyone outside of Christianity. Even within Christians, converts were encouraged to marry converts, non-whites to non-whites, and so on to preserve the “noble blood” and maintain their hegemony through the practice of endogamy. Such policing of sexuality via socio-religious norms, values, and practices contributes to “maintain[ing] the socially defined categories of difference such as race, nation,

class, ethnicity etc” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2014, p. 253). It is also worth noting that such policing of sexuality is also highly gendered whereby women’s experience differs vastly from that of men. Female sexuality was even more strictly policed and scrutinized (Wiesner-Hanks, 2014).

On the contrary, Judaism is comparatively more sex-positive than Christianity and prioritizes sexual pleasure of both husband and wife. Unlike Christianity, it does not idealize celibacy and asceticism. Judaism regards sexual unions between a husband and a wife as a spiritual, holy, and transformative experience where the focus is not only on procreation. However, the subject of sex and sexual pleasure is applicable to married heterosexual couples only and still does not extend beyond (Ribner & Kleinplatz, 2007). Similarly, in Islam, marriage is the only institution that sanctions sexual doings. Islamic religion strongly prohibits sodomy and homoeroticism. This is especially true with men whereby it is thought equivalent to capital crime (Gutiérrez, 2012). We can therefore see that despite the dissimilarity in terms of ideologies, beliefs, and practice within mainstream religions, religion itself plays a vital role in regulating human sexuality worldwide in which there is a lot of emphasis on sexual conduct and its correspondence with the respective socio-religious norms. These norms often adhere to heteronormativity, monogamy, marriage, and procreation, thus contributing to a dominant universalizing discourse on human sexuality.

Within Nepali context, *dharma* and morality take the center stage when approaching the subjects of sex, gender, and sexuality, which are believed to have been derived from Hindu religion. The dominant discourse on sex, gender, and sexuality is religiously policed for strict adherence to the values of heteronormativity, patriarchy, chastity, and virtue. Engaging in sexual practices before marriage, giving birth to a child out of wedlock or before marriage, engaging in queer practices in terms of sexuality and gender, challenging the gender binaries and gender

roles, and the defiance of heteronormativity are all considered socially and religiously deviant immoral deeds and a disservice to Hindu *dharma*. People who condemn non-heteronormative sexualities and queer practices assert that they do so out of respect for Hindu religion and tradition (Shyamsunder, 2013). Hindu values and ideals also attach a significant stigma to any discussion of sex and sexuality, which is regarded as socially and religiously aberrant, and it is considered a debauchery to deliberate on these subjects.

As noted, the dominant discourse around sexuality in Nepal is based upon a heteronormative standard which rarely acknowledges or discusses queer sexualities. When referring to relationships and/or sexual behaviors, heteronormativity is implied by default (Francoeur & Noonan, 2004). Exploring, studying, and documenting unconventional sexual practices and queer sexuality outside of the realm of the commercial sex industry is a significant challenge in Nepal (Francoeur & Noonan, 2004) because sex and sexuality are considered to be private matters. Furthermore, the Nepali vocabulary for sex differentiates between sanctioned and unsanctioned relationships. Indeed, binaries such as married/unmarried, girlfriend/boyfriend, husband/wife, or patron/mistress, reinforce heteronormativity and affirm socially sanctioned sexual relationships. Despite the fact that fluid notions of sex, gender, and sexuality exists within Hindu epics, religion and deities, this fluidity is unacceptable within contemporary Hindu mainstream societies both in India and Nepal. This shift that has taken place within the Hindu norms and beliefs over time incorporated heteronormative ideals in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality which has visible colonialist influence surrounding the discourse.

1.6 Colonial History, Systemic Erasure, and Heteronormativity:

In order to have a holistic understanding of current discourse around gender and sexuality in the context of Hindu societies both within India and Nepal, it is crucial to look at the

intersection of colonialism and sexuality. India was colonized by the British Empire during the beginning of 18th century. What began as a trade expansion by the British, later amplified to administrative and political control over the lands of India. The British Empire ruled India for nearly two centuries whereby they expanded their colonies and consolidated their authority in India (Peers & Gooptu, 2012). Dirks sheds light on the interplay of culture and colonialism in India and views culture as a colonial formation in addition to recognizing colonialism as a cultural formation. He argues that the culture during the British colonial era in India was in fact a byproduct of colonialism;

Cultural forms in newly classified ‘traditional’ societies were reconstructed and transformed by and through colonial technologies of conquest and rule, which created new categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, European and Asian, modern and traditional, West and East, even male and female. (Dirks, 1992, p. 3)

Colonial influence has altered the traditional outlook and understanding on sexuality, especially in the case of India and neighboring countries in South-Asia, which naturalized sexual and gender binaries within their societies. Such colonial encounters reconfigured ‘local moral hierarchies’ (Loos, 2009). Loos (2009) further mentions that “the colonial influence imposed imperial sexual mores and gender norms, including the demand that male and female be clearly distinguished categories according to Western sensibilities, rearranged and delegitimized local sexual and gender norms” (p. 1310). According to Gupta (2011), “gender histories, including those of South Asia during the nineteenth century maintained that sexuality’s relationship to knowledge and power took on explicit contours” (p. 13). Such contours have their foundations in Victorian codes of sexuality that adhered to heteronormativity and binaries in terms of sex and gender. This resulted in the establishment of rigid social norms and strict regulation of sexuality

in colonized societies. The British empire exercised moral surveillance and condemned the so-called ‘obscene’ and ‘lascivious’, and any other non-heteronormative sexual activities that defied the ‘Victorian chastity’ practiced by the then Indian societies in public (Gupta, 2011). This discouraged and marginalized alternate forms of sexualities that existed within those societies at that time and rendered them invisible from the then dominant discourse on sexuality and gender. It can thus be argued that the discourse on gender and sexuality then was largely informed by colonial interactions.

A prime example of the changing discourse towards queer sexuality and gender after British colonialism is evident from the account of Hijras. The existence and acceptance of Hijras, the transgender communities, during pre-colonial Hindu communities can be recognized from the status they held during the medieval period in India. Hijras were appointed as political advisors, administrators, and generals as well as the guardians of the harems during the Mughal rule. They were considered as revered figures within the Islamic religious institutions who were entrusted with the safeguarding of holy places of Mecca and Medina. Likewise, within Hinduism, Hijras are recognized in ancient Vedic and Puranic Hindu literature where they are present in the form of androgynous beings. One of the ancient Hindu texts, *Kamasutra*, acknowledges Hijra identity and the diverse gender and sexual expressions which goes beyond the binary of male/female present within Hinduism. Hijras also held religious authority where their presence was sought for various religious ceremonies (Michelraj, 2015).

Hijras were not only accepted but also revered figures within society who enjoyed high status and privileges. Such practices speak volumes about the then ideologies and discourse around queer and fluid sexualities, as open and accepting of non-heteronormative gender and sexuality. The British colonization of India accounted for several changes and alterations in the

native cultures and their ways of living. Victorian codes on sexuality that adhered to heteronormativity and strict gender binaries were introduced to India whereas any non-heteronormative acts were penalized under the Indian Penal Code Act which was introduced in 1860 (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2015). This changed the socio-cultural milieu of Indian societies concerning gender and sexuality where heteronormativity became the ultimate norm.

Although Nepal was never colonized, colonialism and colonial values in India have had a significant influence in Nepal. Given the fact that Nepal is a part of the great Indian subcontinent whereby socio-cultural exchange between the countries have been taking place over centuries, heteronormativity also became the norm for Hindu societies in Nepal (Kooij, 1978). Situating queer histories and practices within Hindu religious texts during pre-colonial time therefore hints at the existence and acceptance of queer bodies and practices within Hindu societies both in India and Nepal at that time. However, colonial influence alone cannot be held responsible for the heteronormativity present within contemporary Hindu societies in India and Nepal. Although queer sexuality and gender have been a part of Hindu religious discourse, heterosexuality and patriarchy have always been the norm in Hindu tradition where maleness and heterosexuality preceded over queerness and femaleness, even during pre-colonial times. Nevertheless, it was not until the colonial power took charge of the socio-cultural, political, and legal discourse around gender and sexuality in India, that a clear language distinguishing normative and non-normative gender and sexuality was established. What ensued next was the heavy policing of the discourse on gender and sexuality which further cemented the bearings of heteronormativity within Hindu ways of living (Dirks, 1992).

1.7 LGBTQ communities in Nepal:

Nepal is renowned for its activism and commitment to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals and their rights within Asia and is considered one of the most progressive and advanced countries in terms of LGBTQ rights and advocacy in the world. In the past two decades, Nepal has made great political strides in terms of LGBTQ advocacy. A Supreme Court ruling in 2007 safeguarded the human rights of LGBTQ communities, including the establishment of anti-discrimination legislation as well as the explicit recognition and protection of transgender people. The Election Commission of Nepal incorporated the third gender option to voter rolls by 2010 and in 2011 Nepal became the first country in the world to include a third gender option apart from male and female gender binary option within its federal census. In 2015 the government of Nepal also began to issue passports under a third gender category. Furthermore, the enactment of an inclusive constitution in 2015 has further secured the equal human rights and protection to the LGBTQ communities and established Nepal as the world's 10th country to mandate constitutional protection to LGBTQ populations (Knight, 2017).

Nonetheless, such legal and political victories have not necessarily translated into concrete legislative implementation protecting the daily life of LGBTQ individuals who continue to be victims of government bureaucracy, whereby they are subjected to discrimination and harassment by government officials. Furthermore, the LGBTQ community faces discrimination in various walks of lives – such as employment, family, the health care system, education, and other areas. Despite the visible public advocacy around policy and legislative reforms to ensure LGBTQ rights, LGBTQ individuals are mostly compelled to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity and are frequently subjected to human rights violations, stigma, and

discrimination. Thus, in spite of the notable advances on paper, life for the vast majority of LGBTQ people in Nepal remains arduous due to widespread poverty, rigid social norms, and lack of enactment of the existing legal framework and bureaucracy (UNDP & USAID, 2014).

Within the dominant socio-cultural context of Nepal, sexual and gender minorities are considered as a social aberration or '*vikriti*', which is defined as a "state of deterioration that connote[s] disease, degeneracy, deformation and malformation; a perception which pervades Nepali society and creates a powerful stigma against those who identify as sexual and gender minorities" (Boyce & Coyle, 2013, p. 14). It is important to understand that the majority of the stigma against the queer community stems from a lack of understanding and awareness about queer identities and sexualities coupled with heteronormative ideals of sex and gender that have been reinforced time and again through social norms and values that have its origins in religious beliefs and values of Hinduism. However, the binary understanding of sex and gender that is dominant among Hindu societies is misinformed and contradicts the gender and sexual fluidity present within Hinduism. Such misinformed understandings and practices of gender and sexuality normalize heteronormativity while simultaneously perpetuating systemic oppression against queer communities. It is for this reason people consider non-heteronormative sexualities as 'unnatural', 'immoral' and even 'sinful' rooted in orthodox beliefs which manifest in both micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions, intense discrimination, exclusion and stigmatizing of the queer community in general (Greene, 2015). It is therefore important to challenge the falsity that is present within the dominant Hindu discourse around gender and sexual norms and contest the dominant understanding to open up possibilities for both heteronormative and queer expressions and practices to co-exist.

Chapter 2

2. Review of Literature:

Ancient Hindu religious scriptures, literature, art, and architecture are known for embodying several queer themes. It can be argued that Hinduism and Hindu discourse itself are comprised of certain attributes and elements that can be interpreted as queer given that they challenge the norm surrounding gender and sexuality within their representations. *Rg Veda*, which is one of the ancient Hindu scriptures, mentions that the world was void of any distinctions on the basis of sex and gender in ancient times. Similarly, the Hindu origin myth speaks of androgynous ancestors whose sexuality and gender are blurred and vague (Nanda, 2000). It is therefore not uncommon to find queer and androgynous figures and tales within Hinduism which comprise complex characters and storylines that disrupt heteronormativity in terms of sex and gender. For example, there are stories of the pregnant king, eunuch prince, gender-bending female characters, stories of homoeroticism between heterosexual males and more (Pattanaik, 2014). Such narratives point to the admittance of varied forms of sexuality and gender alongside heterosexuality within ancient Hinduism.

Although traditional Hindu religious literature and narratives such as the *Vedas*, *Shastras*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Puranas* and religious folklore consist of various forms of queerness, the subject of queerness in itself is rendered covert and not confronted openly within these scriptures and texts. Both *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the two major *Sanskrit* epics of the Hindus that serves as the foundation of Hindu beliefs and ideals, are known for embodying various forms of queerness within their narratives which are not deliberated upon or discussed openly. Highlighting the queerness that is present in Hindu religious texts such as *Mahabharata* is vital as it informs the religious practice and Hindu religion in itself. A queer feminist reading

of Hindu texts such as *Mahabharata* could play a crucial role in pushing boundaries in terms of the rigid binary understanding of gender and sexuality that is present within the Hindu communities; hence it holds the potential to create space for alternative sexuality and gender that goes beyond the male/female binary and legitimizes queer expressions that are currently being enacted within contemporary Hindu society in Nepal.

2.1 Dominant understanding of the text:

Mahabharata serves as one of the holy books which are considered foundational for Hinduism and holds a significant place within Hindu societies in Nepal and India. Within recent decades its popularity has soared within all art forms ranging from traditional, religious, folk to popular mass culture in the forms of television series, books, radio programs, classical theater, mass-produced cartoon strips etc. This has increased both the accessibility and popularity of *Mahabharata* and has made direct contributions to reinstate the Hindu consciousness of people whereby Hindus engage in a form of devotional viewing of *Mahabharata* which combines both piety and pleasure at the same time. It has played a crucial role in knitting *Mahabharata* and its values within the fabric of contemporary Hindu people and their lives (Gillespie, 1995).

When approaching ancient religious texts such as *Mahabharata*, it is important to note that although the epic is documented within texts and in oral traditions, it has gone through numerous retellings and transitions. Narayan and Doniger (2013) point to the temporality and fluidity of the epic where multiple versions and translations of the epic exist. This has resulted into numerous interpretations and deliberations on the epic from various perspectives and school of thoughts that looks into various themes of Hindu philosophy, Hindu culture, ethics, ethnology, orientalism, peace and war, government, statecraft, power, politics, gender roles and relations, and theology to only name a few of the many. Despite such multiple renditions, the central theme

and message of the epic are however centered on Hindu ideals, philosophies, and morals on life. *Bhagavad Gita* is the acme of the epic which is considered to be the essence of Hindu philosophy. There is a part of *Mahabharata* where Lord Krishna and Arjuna have a spiritual dialogue comprised of several key messages about life and conduct, the concept of *atma* (soul), faith, mankind and its relationship to god, *karma*, sacrifice, oneness, righteousness, conscience, wisdom and several other complex moral and spiritual ideas such as *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha* (Nandula & Surve, 2014). Such spiritual meanings and philosophies on human life, conduct, and morality from the epic have been translated within the daily discourse for the Hindus which has normalized certain attributes, ideals, and way of living as the ideal while simultaneously distinguishing others as misguided and immoral.

Gillespie (1995) points to the ways in which recent manifestations of the Hindu epics such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are appropriated and interpreted within specific local contexts and how they get infused in the construction and reinforcement of religious beliefs and practices. Recent renditions of the epic within the mass culture have been criticized for promoting and strengthening Hindu fundamentalism and Hindu nationalism within Hindu societies in both India and Nepal. One of the many premises of Hindu fundamentalism and Hindu nationalism is heteronormativity and patriarchy which prevents any queer and feminist readings or interpretations of the text while it centers and institutes heterosexuality, marriage, progeny, chastity, and loyalty within its religious discourse for Hindu societies. This has significantly impacted the ways Hindu societies perceive and interact with LGBTQ communities while contributing toward increased heteronormativity within these societies.

2.2 Religious cleansing of the epic:

Some scholars have pointed to the religious cleansing of the epic that has occurred over time within its multiple retellings which are hesitant to deliberate upon identities and narratives that deviate from the rigid gender and sexual binaries. “It is common to either deny existence of such fluidity in our stories or simply locate them in the realm of the supernatural or point to law books that, besides endorsing patriarchy and casteism, also frown upon queer behavior” (Pattanaik, 2014, p.12). Manghram (2009) points to such sanitization of the epic and says that “... contemporary retellings of *Ramayana* have desexualized the epic so that it reflects extremely conservative attitudes towards marriage, sex, and sexuality” (p.75). Such conservative attitudes represent a dominant, hegemonic ideology that has its foundation in heteronormativity, patriarchy, Hindu nationalism, casteism, and colonialism. Bacchetta (1999) defines “queerphobia as one of the pillars of Hindu nationalism” (p. 143) where queer identities are ‘othered’ and are rendered outside the Hindu nation. It also ousts any efforts that tries to revive queerness. “The ideal Hindu-nationalist citizen-body rests on the exclusion of ‘others’ who embody, albeit differentially, improper gendering, sexuality, and nationalization” (Bacchetta, 1999, p. 151). To date, right-wing Hindu nationalism in India uses religion as a tool to propagate, regulate, control, and repress human sexuality. Hindu nationalism serves the vested interest of the elite Hindu nationalist population whose heteronormative, patriarchal, and queerphobic ideologies are behind such sanitization and censorship present within Hindu religious discourse. Such retellings of Hindu epics, including *Mahabharata*, are often appropriated according to the Hindu nationalist interests which prevent any queer or feminist interpretation and understanding of it all while reinforcing heteronormativity within Hindu ideals and practices.

2.3 Approaching *Mahabharata* from a queer feminist perspective:

There are few studies that touch upon alternative and fluid notions of sexualities, sexual and gender transformations that take place within the epic. However, the few studies that have looked into the gendered nature of the epic and probed into queer sexualities and gender within the epic do not connect the religious discourse on queer sexualities and practices with the contemporary queer discourse and practice. For instance, Pattanaik (2014) notes that

within *Mahabharata*, there are stories of men who become women, and women who become men, of men who create children without women, and women who create children without men, and of creatures who are neither this, nor that, but a little bit of both. (p.12)

Pattanaik (2014) points out that through these stories, *Mahabharata* showcases the volatility and indefiniteness of gender and sexuality where the characters go through different forms of sexual transformation and gender metamorphosis. In doing so, the characters within the stories not only defy the rigid binaries of heteronormativity but also showcase the ability to revert back and forth from different forms of sexualities and gender.

Such queer narratives from the epic engage the readers into 'non-conforming' ways of living that are present in ancient Hindu texts and practices. Pattanaik (2014) analyzes these tales from Hindu traditions that revolve around queer themes of sexual transformation and gender metamorphosis and establishes that even when the anatomy and apparel of the characters seem obvious and easy to identify, the way we perceive and speculate on their sexual orientation today says a lot about the current mainstream understanding of specific bodies as having specific sexualities. Such perceptions do not necessarily reflect the understanding of Hindus in ancient

societies where transgressive queer understandings and perceptions were present and socially accepted.

However, such studies of queer representations within Hindu religion are rarely put in conversation with the existing queer discourse within contemporary Hindu societies of Nepal and India despite the strong correlation between Hindu religion and sexuality. When delving into the issue of queer identities and the burgeoning LGBTQ activism and resistance in Nepal, it is crucial to look into the intersection of religion and sexuality to gain a holistic understanding of both heteronormative and alternate forms of sexualities and gender that are present in Nepali societies. Given that Nepal is a predominantly Hindu country where queer discourse, activism, and resistance is thriving, it only seems fitting to explore the parallels between Hindu religion and sexuality. However, any discussion of queerness that is present in Hindu texts and overall Hindu religion is incomplete without deliberating on the concept of *Tritiya Prakriti*. When it comes to the discussion of queer sexualities, it is crucial to underscore the fact that Hindu religion admits queer sexuality within its ancient *Vedic* literature termed as *Tritiya Prakriti* which loosely translates as ‘The Third Sex’. It is therefore important to situate the concept of *Tritiya Prakriti* within this study when engaging in a queer feminist analysis of *Mahabharata*.

2.4 *Tritiya Prakriti*: The Third Sex

The idea of queer sexuality that defies the rigid binaries of male/female within Hindu religious discourse has been there since its inception. Such queer manifestations are altogether recognized as *Tritiya Prakriti*. The ancient Hindu Vedic literature acknowledges three different human ‘*prakriti*’ (which loosely translates to ‘nature’) namely *Pums Prakriti* (male nature), *Stri Prakriti* (female nature), and *Tritiya Prakriti* (third nature) which is commonly known as the ‘third sex’. The term *Prakriti* does not just denote sex or gender variation but is rather a holistic

term that denotes the complete biological, physical, and psychological state of being whereas the term *Tritiya Prakriti* refers to those who do not align either with male nature or female nature and defy such male/female binary be it in terms of sex, gender, and/or sexuality (Wilhelm, 2004). Such recognition of *Tritiya Prakriti* within Hinduism underscores the fact that queer sexuality and identity has been acknowledged and accepted within Hinduism. Wilhelm (2004) posits *Tritiya Prakriti* as homosexuals, transgenders, and the intersexed within the Hindu discourse and provides Hindu references from *Sanskrit, Vedas*, and literature including *Mahabharata* whereby several gods, deities, and characters personify the *Tritiya Prakriti*. For example, the Hijras within the Hindu religious discourse are a notable example of *Tritiya Prakriti* who were revered during the ancient times and held the positions of artisans and performers. By acknowledging *Tritiya Prakriti* as one of the many forms of human nature/*prakriti*, Hinduism admits queer identities and sexualities within its religious discourse.

Tritiya Prakriti is theorized as somewhat equivalent of the word ‘queer’ for it also embodies the notion of sexual fluidity that has been present in Hinduism since ancient times.

Within the Hindu sex/gender systems, the interchange of male and female qualities, transformations of sex and gender, the incorporation of male and female within one person, and alternative sex and gender roles, among deities and humans, are meaningful and positive themes in mythology, ritual, and art. (Nanda, 2000, p.28)

Such fluidity that is present within the Hindu religious discourse directly challenges the rigid binaries that are present in the current Hindu societies in the form of maleness and femaleness. Given the fact that *Tritiya Prakriti* embodies the notion of sexual fluidity, it rejects the binaries that exist when approaching gender and sexuality. Focusing on the concept of *Tritiya Prakriti* can lend an important critical perspective which enables Hindu societies not to reduce their

sexuality and gender within a heteronormative framework but rather understand and open up to a variety of possibilities and plurality of gender and sexual identity and practice. It allows people to see the fluid nature of gender and sexuality and hence push boundaries in terms of dominant heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality that is currently present in Hinduism. Thus, centering the concept of *Tritiya Prakriti* within the current dominant discourse on Hinduism and Hindu practices can have a legitimizing effect for the queerness that is currently being enacted in Hindu societies in Nepal and India.

2.5 Modern interpretations of gender and sexuality within the epic:

An alternate interpretation of the epic that approaches the stories with an awareness of existing fluidity in terms of gender, sexuality, and power hierarchies within the epic deconstructs them by giving cultural, political, and religious accounts of how stories have been structured the way they are now (Pattanaik, 2010). Such alternative interpretations are posited by situating the stories within the socio-cultural context and narrating the stories from the periphery. Based on Pattanaik's (2010) retelling of *Mahabharata*, Maitra and Saha (2016) delve into the existing queerness within the epic that distorts the gender distinctions between femininity and masculinity and question the fixed notions of gender and sexuality. By looking into several gender-bending characters and narratives from the epic such as Arjuna, Krishna, Amba, Maitra and Saha (2016) challenge the hegemonic gender relations, normative sexual practices, and gender norms that exist in contemporary Hindu societies. Maitra and Saha (2016) provide a nuanced analysis of characters and narratives that exude varied forms of queerness such as transsexualism and gender fluidity.

Maitra and Saha (2016) further maintain that gender is not a fixed identity but rather provisional and negotiable and mention that "if gender is one of the foundational pillars upon

which the elaborate edifice of *dharma* rests in the *Mahabharata*, interesting alternative possibilities emerge as well (p. 3). By analyzing several gender-bending characters within the epic, they showcase how normative gender roles have been subverted and challenged throughout *Mahabharata*. It highlights the significance of rewriting and retelling the stories from a unique perspective as Pattanaik (2010) that allows the alternative narratives, marginalized tales and subordinate voices within the epic to resurface and queer the hegemonic construction of gender and sexuality within the epic.

Similarly, Agoramoorthy and Hsu (2015) acknowledge the existence and recognition of transgenderism, homosexuality and other queer sexualities within ancient Hindu scriptures of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and position such queer presence in relation to the ongoing resistance against the transgender community known as Hijras in India. Their study highlights the struggles and discrimination faced by the transgender communities in India that manifest in the forms of social stigma, taboo, criminalization, hatred, violence and other forms of resistance from the society. The article deliberates on the transgender forms of Arjuna as Brihannala from *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna's transformation into Mohini who marries the King Iravan (also known as Aravan), and the gender metamorphosis of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati as *Ardhanaraishvara* to outline the transgenderism present within ancient Hindu scripts and literature. Although the article highlights the role of British colonialism and their introduction of Section 377 of the Penal Code that criminalized homosexuality by enforcing heteronormativity within the Hindu societies in India, it does not say much about the way heteronormative ideals on gender and sexuality had its impact on the reprisal of ancient Hindu epics such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* which were tailored to fit within the heteronormative ideals and standards of the contemporary Hindu society within India. Such colonial impact within the

ancient Hindu religious discourse also played a crucial role in changing the gender and sexual milieu of the then Hindu societies in India and its neighboring countries within the great Indian subcontinent. Reiterating the fact that the concept of sexual fluidity existed in Hinduism and in India, Wilhelm (2004) mentions how colonialism and foreign influences invaded the system and discourses around sexuality and gender in early Hindu societies.

2.6 Gendered voices within the epic:

Apart from the gender and sexual fluidity, gender norms and practices within the epic have also enthused some conversations among scholars and academics. However, those conversations are for the most part relegated to ‘theological’ and ‘metaethical’ discourses on *dharma*/righteousness and *adharma*/unrighteousness (Dhand, 2008). Although such studies shed light on the sexual ideologies from within the epic, it situates those analyses strictly within the religious sphere of the text. Such understandings of sex, sexuality, and gender stem from a religious perspective which does not engage with any other domains that fall outside of Hindu religious praxis. Similarly, the construction of such binaries within sexuality as *dharma/adharma* is limiting as it does not nuance the ideas around sex, gender, and sexuality within the epic. Although religion lends a unique lens through which sexuality can be viewed and articulated, the epic is comprised of complex narratives and characters that challenge, negotiate and deviate from the established religious norms of gender and sexuality. Analyzing and understanding such existing complexities within the epic requires navigation through and across ‘religious’ boundaries (Goldman, 2009). Likewise, contextualizing the existing complexities of gender and sexuality present in the epic with the current discourse on gender and sexuality found within contemporary Hindu societies can illuminate new ways of thinking about gender and sexuality.

Women figures in *Mahabharata* also remain a much-deliberated subject and have been studied from a gender-specific approach in order to provide a general theory on women and female sexuality within the epic (McGrath, 2009). Such interpretive generalizations on 'women' raises the question of what actually constitutes a 'woman' and more specifically, what constitutes 'Kshatriya (warrior clan within Hindu caste hierarchy system) women' in the epic. McGrath's (2009) project is reductive in its attempt to theorize 'women' within *Mahabharata* as a single and rigid category. It also lacks an interdisciplinary approach while deconstructing and theorizing the female characters, their gender, and sexual orientation in the epic who are far more complex and call for a more nuanced analysis that goes beyond just interpretive generalizations (Brodbeck, 2010). McGrath's (2009) definition of femininity in the context of the epic refers to "those qualities which cohere about women in the poem, which are particular to them and which distinguish them as women" (p. 1). Such monolithic characterization of women within the epic in itself is problematic and limiting because there are several female characters in the epic who have diverse attributes, experiences, and identities that are fluid and complex which cannot be reduced to a single category. While referring to Amba who reincarnates as Shikhandi, a transsexual character from the epic, McGrath (2009) states that "femininity is a quality which cannot be modified or in any way altered, and thus would seem to approximate to an absolute" (p. 113) and hence maintains that femininity is static, absolute, and fixed. Given the existing complexity, fluidity, and metamorphosis of gender within the characters in the epic, McGrath's (2009) notion of womanhood or femininity is abstract and unclear. Furthermore, the lack of reflection on various forms of sexualities within femininity and female characters within the epic that transgress sex and gender provides an incomplete account of women in the epic with complex gendered identities and narratives (Black, 2011).

Some of the scholars have captured the complexity of diverse gender construction and performances that take place within the narratives by focusing on the characters, their voices, stories, and how their stories play out within their respective socio-cultural contexts as opposed to focusing on the overarching dogmatic and moralistic messages of the narratives (Jamison, 2008). The discussions and analysis of gender are however limited within the historicized socio-cultural contexts of the epic and do not connect with and provide any analysis on the discourse around gender within contemporary Hindu tradition and society. Despite the fact that the epic is considered to be the cornerstone of Hindu beliefs which are in themselves a living practice, there is no discussion and analysis of existing gender norms and practices in specific relation to the epic. Its failure to tie the epic into the socio-cultural discourse within South Asian and Hindu culture can be mapped as one of the limitations of such gendered analysis (Ferrari, 2010). A closer look into diverse gendered voices present within the epic that are both subversive and conventional in nature can better inform our understanding of gender and sexuality that is enacted within the epic. Furthermore, this can also help challenge the dominant heteronormative tropes around gender and sexuality that exist within present-day Hindu societies.

2.7 Issues within *Mahabharata* and Hinduism:

Although *Mahabharata* embodies several queer themes which can be underscored to challenge the existing heteronormativity within Hindu societies, the epic in itself is not an ideal text as it simultaneously reproduces some of the systemic oppressions. It is important to note the existing social hierarchies and hegemonies within the text and Hindu religion at large that favored certain sexualities and caste groups over others during both pre-colonial and colonial times. Several scholars have looked into the issues of classism, casteism, and sexism that are inherent within the epic.

Gopinath (2011) draws on the importance of queer diasporic scholarships to critique “the white normativity of queer studies and heteronormativity of diaspora studies” (p. 635). Gopinath (2005) also calls attention to the issues of racism, sexism, colonialism, nationalism, classism, and caste-ism through her work and provides a rubric for queer and diasporic scholarships which sheds light on various systems of oppression. Her work is crucial in recognizing various forms of “subjectivities and the workings of power” that emerge within queer studies (Gopinath, 2011, p. 636). It is for this reason, a queer reading of *Mahabharata* also warrants the study of sexism, classism, casteism, and Hindu nationalism within its study and recognizes the various workings of power that are latent within this historical religious text. It is also worth noting that the leading story in the epic revolves around the rivalry between two clans and the great war between them where the protagonists of the story are heterosexual males. Most of the characters in the epic belong to high caste *Kshatriyas*, a warrior clan and *Hindu Brahmins* (priests), who are on top within the Hindu caste hierarchy system which reflects the marginalization and silencing of low caste people and their stories within the epic. The stories in the epic mostly revolve around elite ruling classes comprised of royal kings, queens, princes, and princesses which raises the question of whose stories have been told and heard historically and whose stories have been rendered invisible, unheard, and silenced. Within Hindu societies, queer sexualities were often equated with *Dalits* (the marginalized low caste communities within a rigid caste-based Hindu society who are also known as the untouchables) whereas *Dalit* women’s sexuality was often questioned, exploited, and rendered disposable by the high caste Hindu Brahmins (Gupta, 2011). Such discriminatory practices existed during both pre-colonial and colonial times and continues to exist. Approaching such historic texts with a nuanced and critical socio-political understanding is crucial in situating the sub-altern (Spivak, 1988) voices and untold narratives around it. Also,

there are many stories and instances within the epic that continuously marginalize, oppress, and dominate women and genders other than the 'male'. Patriarchal ideals and beliefs are upheld within the narratives in *Mahabharata* where male identities and experiences are privileged over other gender identities such as women and queer characters.

Likewise, the contemporary discourse around Hindu nationalism in India has been reinstated by the right-wing party RSS (*Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*) that situates Hinduism at the crux of nation-making. Such ideals on Hindu nationalism institutionalizes state mechanisms to repress the marginalized communities and identities who do not share the Hindu nationalist ideals and are not Hindu. Bacchetta (1999) discusses 'queerphobia' as one of the pillars of Hindu nationalism where the definitions of gender and sexuality have been renegotiated through Hindu nationalist reworkings giving it a very patriarchal and heteronormative texture. Some of the effects of asserting Hindu nationalist ideals within the discourse on gender and sexuality is valorizing the masculine traits in men, the practice of obligatory asexuality in the form of celibacy within Hindu nationalist leaders whereas forced heterosexuality for Hindu nationalized masses. Such Hindu nationalist constructions of gender and sexuality have marginalized and othered queer gender and sexuality and reduced them 'outside' the Hindu nation. By excluding those who embody queer sexuality and gender, Hindu nationalism reinforces heteronormativity and heteropatriarchy for the entire Hindu nationalized society (Bacchetta, 1999). Such sentiments of Hindu nationalism have had influence in Nepal where a large majority of the population is still Hindu. Using religion to regulate and normalize heterosexuality and gender while rendering queer sexualities as 'other' establishes queer sexualities and bodies as sexual and gender deviants within Hindu nationalism.

2.8 Conclusion:

Although the aforementioned studies discuss the queerness present within Hinduism, they do not delve into the analysis of how it translates into the daily lives of Hindus. Despite the fact that there have been studies about Hinduism, gender, and sexuality, which touch on stories, alternative narratives and themes surrounding sexual and gender fluidity, there is a missing link that fails to connect the religious discourse on queer sexuality within contemporary socio-cultural discourse surrounding gender and sexuality. The existing literature and studies on queer representations within *Mahabharata* and Hindu religious discourse at large do not quite translate into the lived experiences of queer communities residing in Hindu religious societies. This suggests a need to explore the possibilities of positing the idea of sexual and gender fluidity present in ancient Hindu religious discourse within the current discourse on gender and sexuality commonly conveyed in Hindu societies where queer sexualities and bodies continue to navigate the contours of heteronormativity, sexual, and gender binaries. Studies so far have not explored the potential role of centering the queer narratives from the epic or the Hindu religious discourse and situating it with the current discourse on gender and sexuality in contemporary Hindu society. Through this study, I try to offer some reflections on what a queer feminist reading of a Hindu text such as *Mahabharata* might look like and how it can provide an alternate language in terms of theorizing and understanding queer gender and sexuality present within *Mahabharata* and Hindu religion itself.

Chapter 3

3. Methodology:

This study employs textual analysis as its research method which is guided by a queer feminist theoretical lens. A queer reading of the text questions the socially constructed nature of gender, sex, and sexuality and sheds light on heteronormativity as a system of oppression. It also recognizes the workings of power and oppression within the narrative based on the socio-cultural context and diverse positionalities of the characters in terms of gender, race, class, caste, nation, religion, etc. By exploring potential queer nuances within the text, a queer analysis also challenges the ‘normativity’ of any given text by offering an alternate interpretation of the text, whereas a feminist reading situates the sub-altern voices and characters within the text and calls out patriarchy as a system of oppression. A feminist analysis of the text also seizes agency for the otherwise relegated bodies such as women, queer, and the Dalits who are often subject to implicit discrimination and victimization within any given narrative. A queer feminist reading therefore questions the binary of sex and gender, existing power hierarchies, and various systems of oppression within a given text.

Having a qualitative research method that is grounded in feminist and queer theories is crucial for this research to derive meanings from the everyday discourse around sex, gender, and sexuality in the context of Nepal. I rely on the theoretical framework based in Judith Butler’s “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity” (1990) in particular. Textual analysis as a research method involves a close reading of any cultural object or text, written or visual and “examines the details without bringing to them more presuppositions than we can help” (Belsey, 2005, p. 160). It is comprised of gathering and analyzing texts, and enabling the researcher to describe and interpret features, characteristics, and the meaning of any given text.

Belsey (2005) mentions that textual analysis as a method is vital when conducting research in “cultural criticism which includes cultural history and cultural studies” (p. 160); hence it is applicable for this study as it looks into ‘*Mahabharata*’ as an integral part of Hindu cultural and religious discourse. Textual analysis as a method is useful to analyze the texts from *Mahabharata* and derive meaning from its interpretation, whereas an analytical reading of *Mahabharata* from a queer feminist perspective allows the readers to develop alternate meanings and realities other than the dominant understandings and interpretations of it. A close reading as such includes careful exploration and exposition of what a text says when asked new questions that are guided by new ways of thinking. This illuminates different kinds of knowledge and information about the text. Textual analysis is therefore vital in revisiting *Mahabharata* and exploring the alternative narratives on non-normative practices of sexuality that go beyond heteronormative understandings on sexuality and gender of those religious texts and narratives. Some of the questions that I raise using this method are what the text is about, how it creates meaning in the society, what are the dominant interpretations and existing discourse around it, and how will it hold different meanings when situated textually and historically through a queer and feminist lens. As described by McKee, “when we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (2003, p. 1). This research is an attempt to theorize and explore the nuances and latent meanings of the text (i.e. narratives) from *Mahabharata* while applying a queer and feminist lens that offers some reflections on what that might look like in relation to the larger discourses on sex, gender, and sexuality in the context of Nepali Hindu society.

3.1 Research Question:

For this research, I look into four different tales from the epic which I then read closely through queer feminist perspectives allowing me to deconstruct dominant interpretations and instead explore alternate meanings and understandings that have been silenced. The key question that informs my analysis is:

- In what way does the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* embody queerness and what does that reveal about Hindu religious texts and discourse in relation to gender and sexuality?

3.2 Theoretical Framework:

The study employs queer feminist theory as a critical methodology to read the representations of sexualities in Hindu theology in relation to/against enforced heteronormativity in Nepali society. The need to introduce queer theory in understanding both the religious discourse and the social discourse around sexuality and gender in the context of Nepal is vital. Queer theory employs a critical lens to sexuality and gender which challenges anything that is believed to be 'normal' or 'natural'. It challenges the fixed notions of identity and maintains that identities, be they sexual and/or gendered, are socially constructed and hence not rigid but fluid. Queer theory builds on the feminist critique of gender binaries such as male/female and masculine/feminine and identifies heteronormativity as a system of oppression. It examines the socially constructed nature of gendered as well as sexual identities and behaviors, and theorizes on the sexual acts and gender identities that dominant social norms tend to divide into normative and deviant categories. In doing so, queer theories have challenged the traditional and essentialist notion of 'gender', 'sex', and 'gendered identity' and instead renegotiated the definitions and workings of sex and gender which place gender, sexuality, and sexual norms at the center of analysis.

Queer feminist theories maintain that sex, gender, and sexuality are a social construct as opposed to natural. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity outlines that gender is not a stable identity but the result of reiterated acting that produces the effect of a static, normal or true gender. Therefore, "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time and is instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Butler also calls out the performative aspect of gender and sexuality that have been normalized through repeated performance of norms, signs, and conventions that adheres to and privilege heteronormativity. She maintains that gender and sexual binaries are not a natural construct but a socio-cultural one produced and maintained by human societies. The binary in terms of sex and gender is 'scripted' which needs to be performed time and again to reproduce it as a reality (1990, p. 272). Any individual who does not follow the script that strictly adheres to heteronormativity, and transgresses such socially established norms, is immediately identified as 'other', 'non-normative', 'queer', or those who are considered unacceptable to society. Building on Butler's theory of performativity, Mann (2012) states that "gender and sexuality are composed of acts of striving to achieve a seemingly natural and universal idea that has never actually existed in the pure form to which we aspire" (p. 242); thus, queer theory as a critical lens allows us to recognize the plurality that exists in terms of gender and sexuality and disrupt the rigidity that is present in the form of male/female binaries.

Moreover, queer theory poses a critique towards anything that is 'oppressively normal' (Mann, 2012). Theorizing from a queer perspective is useful in questioning the 'normalized' ideals on sex, gender, and sexuality and resisting the oppressive 'regimes of normal' (Mann, 2012). Such critiques of 'normativity' are crucial for challenging the inherent heteronormativity present in Nepali society while creating space for alternate expressions and narratives around sex and sexuality that have been marginalized. Furthermore, "queer theory recognizes that such

identities are constructed through the deployment of social power, including the power of discourse and naming” (Cheng, 2015, p. 153). Queer theory also identifies and analyzes the social norms, institutions, and the larger social discourse as a system of oppression which produces a normalizing, dominant discourse on gender and sexuality and how it privileges heterosexism. Furthermore, queer theory moves beyond the binary of heterosexuality and homosexuality or queer sexuality and also recognizes the oppression of identities based on race, class, caste, religion, nationality, etc. Queer of color theorists such as Gopinath (2005), Ahmed (2006), and Munoz (1999) have been especially critical of the homonormativities of queer studies outlining that it mostly adheres to the white and upper/middle-class bracket and call for an intersectional approach to understanding the histories of sexuality and multiple forms of oppression other than heterosexism. It is in this way that a queer feminist theoretical perspective allows me to theorize on the narratives and characters from the *Mahabharata* who contend the dominant understandings of gender and sexuality that is present today in Hindu societies as I critique and shed light on the naturalized nature of gender and sexual identities. Further still, a queer feminist analysis of the narratives also recognizes other forms of oppression such as sexism, classism, caste-ism, Hindu nationalism, and colonialism which remain covert especially within the dominant Hindu socio-religious discourse.

Nielsen (1990) talks about the usefulness of feminist and queer theories within social research in illuminating social reality and changing the paradigm within traditional social science research that is immersed in traditional positivist methods. Nielsen (1990) further maintains that employing a feminist and queer lens within social science research provides a holistic outlook and understanding on social processes and reality. Revisiting the stories and narratives from *Mahabharata* where it blurs the gender and sexual binaries, transgresses heteronormativity and

engages in varied forms of queerness from a queer and feminist perspective allows us to illuminate alternative possibilities in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality present within Hindu theology, specifically within *Mahabharata* and underline the existing queer practices in the ancient times. In doing so, it creates space for queer sexualities and identities in Nepal and puts it in conversation with the existence of queerness within Hindu theology in ancient times. It is for this reason my research is guided by queer and feminist theories which aim to question the existing heteronormativity, sexual and gender binaries, and gendered roles in Nepali Hindu society by juxtaposing queer sexualities from within Hindu theology and current Nepali society and explore the discursively created sexual and gender identities and norms.

3.3 Positionality:

Growing up in a very traditional and conservative Hindu family in Nepal where heteronormativity is the norm, I rarely had conversations about sex, gender, and sexuality. As an adult, conversations with friends and peers was always limited within heteronormativity where non-heteronormative and queer practices was not a part of our everyday discourse. Later my activism and passion to work within the social and development sector led me to work with various non-profit organizations that were advocating for gender equality and inclusivity within national policies and programs. As I got involved in the work, I was determined to pursue a degree in Women and Gender Studies to enhance my understanding, build my academic rigor, and contribute in the given area.

The Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program at OSU introduced me to the term ‘Queer’ and the ongoing discourse around queer theories and queer sexuality. I realized that within the ongoing conversation on gender and gender equality in Nepal, queer sexualities were largely missing, not recognized, and marginalized. Upon reflecting on my past work experiences,

I also realized how heteronormative the non-profit organizations were in terms of their approach, policies, and programs. The predominant understanding of gender equality in Nepal is seen within the binaries of male and female. I was able to connect my class discussions and readings with the historical marginalization of the LGBTQ community in Nepal and their ongoing resistance for equality, social justice, and inclusion. This led me to question and challenge my own understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality which was entrenched in heteronormativity. I also realized that my socialization and various social institutions such as family, society, religion and social norms played a crucial role in shaping my understandings and the way I perceived and understood gender roles, norms, and sexuality. My lived experience as a straight, cisgender woman who comes from a traditional heteronormative Hindu family and as a graduate student in Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies where the rhetoric on queer sexualities is an integral component allows me to nuance and queer the traditional Hindu understandings of sex, gender, and human sexuality.

3.4 Selection of Texts:

I have relied on the English translations of the epic by four different authors for my data viz. *The Mahabharata: A shortened modern prose version of the Indian epic* by Narayan, R., & Doniger, Wendy. (2013), *The Mahābhārata; an English version based on selected verses* by Narasimhan (1965), *Jaya: An illustrated retelling of the Mahabharata* by Pattanaik, D. (2010) and *The Mahābhārata; attributed to Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa* by Nooten, B. (1971). I focus on four different narratives/tales within the epic which will then be analyzed and interpreted from a queer and feminist lens. The narratives are i) Kunti and the birth of the Pandavas; ii) Draupadi's marriage to five Pandavas; iii) Arjuna's transition into Brihannala; and iv) Lord Krishna's transition into Mohini.

The research specifically looks into the narratives and tales from the *Mahabharata* that had elements of queerness within it. Based on the selected four narratives, I derived themes of polyandry, premarital sex and motherhood, womanhood, homosexuality and homoeroticism, transsexuality, gender fluidity and ambiguity, sexual transformation and gender metamorphosis within the text for coding. I then juxtaposed the emerging themes with the dominant discourse on gender and sexuality in the context of Nepal and point to the heteronormative attitude held by Nepali Hindu societies today.

Chapter 4

4. Analysis:

This chapter analyzes the original texts from *Mahabharata* from a queer feminist lens. Here I provide a summary of the narratives from the epic as it is at first and then delve into the queer feminist reading of the same narrative. In doing so, I provide an alternate interpretation of those narratives highlighting the existing gender and sexual fluidity within it and then discuss how it holds differently from the dominant understandings. I later put those analyses in conversation with the contemporary socio-cultural discourse around queer identities and practices in Nepal.

Original narratives from *Mahabharata*:

4.1 Kunti and the birth of the Pandavas:

Kunti is the female protagonist in the epic who is also the mother of ‘Pandavas’, the heroes of the epic. Kunti is blessed by Sage Dhurvasa when she was young. Sage Dhurvasa, known for his rage and quick temperament, is impressed by Kunti’s service and hospitality while visiting Kunti’s parents and blesses her to become a mother of godly children. He imparts her a ‘*mantra*’ (spell) with which she can invoke any god to bear her child. He says that “...through the radiance of those celestials whom you invoke by this spell, you will obtain progeny” (Narasimhan, 1965, p. 19). Kunti experiments with the mantra and summons ‘Surya’, the sun deity and bears a son named ‘Karna’ from this transitory encounter with the sun god. Given her status as an unmarried, virgin woman, she abandons the child and places him in a basket and sets him afloat (Ghosh, 2016).

Kunti is later married to Pandu, the King of Hastinapura who is cursed to die if he is to consummate his marital relationship. One day when Pandu was hunting, he kills a deer while it is

mating. The deer turn out to be two celestial beings: a sage and his wife. The sage is miserable after Pandu kills his wife and curses Pandu to die if he ever indulges in coitus. Pandu is therefore unable to bear an heir to the throne as he cannot consummate his marriage with Kunti. Kunti explains the blessing she received from sage Dhurvasa to Pandu and he then induces Kunti to invoke gods to have children whereby she bears Yudhistira from Yama, the god of death and justice, Bhimasena from Vayu, the god of wind, and Arjuna from Indra, the chief of Gods. Pandu's second wife, Madri, follows Kunti's mantra and gives birth to the twins Nakula and Sahadeva from the twin god, Aswins (Ghosh, 2016); hence the five Pandavas are not really the sons of Pandu but are born out of a non-monogamous union with gods (Ghosh, 2016).

Queer/Feminist interpretation of the text:

Hindu societies until now are largely patriarchal which places a great emphasis on having a son as the legitimate heir of the family. Having a son is important to continue the family name, look after the parents, and inherit their legacy. The importance that is laden on the male figures to carry on the family name also gives continuity to compulsory heterosexuality (Ahmed, 2006) where marriage for procreation must take place. Here, patriarchy that is heteronormative becomes the norm and operates as a 'straightening device' where bodies, their sexuality, and gender acquire a certain orientation that leans towards hetero-normalization (Ahmed, 2006). Lastly, a son plays a crucial role in performing the death rites of the ancestors after which the departed soul is believed to gain '*moksha*' or salvation in their afterlife. As per the Hindu customs, a daughter cannot continue the family lineage as she is married off into 'another' family clan and also not allowed to perform the final death rites. It is for this reason having a son is extremely important and valued. In ancient Hindu texts, failure to procreate at all, and also to bear a male child, was looked upon as a social aberration whereby alternative ways of producing

children and sons were sought. Performing sacrificial rites, praying to gods, varied forms of polygamy and polyandry including levirate, were just some of the ways to procreate if one was unable to bear children within the institution of marriage. Kunti and Madri both engage in *Niyoga* “wherein a widow or the wife of an impotent man is temporarily made to cohabit with a designated person to procure a son who would be regarded as the son of his mother’s legal husband” (Sahgal, 2012, p. 163). The practice of *Niyoga* is found within several ancient Hindu narratives where it was hailed as a ‘strategy of heirship’ where male figures were unable to procreate. Kane (1974) defines “*Niyoga* as the appointment of a wife or a widow to procreate a son from the intercourse of with an appointed male” (p. 599). It can therefore be classified as the sanctioned sexual union between a married woman and a man other than her husband for the purpose of procreation, mostly a male child.

Having a son is equally important for Hindus today where sons take precedence over daughters in terms of socio-cultural status and importance for the same reasons as above. However, such practice of *Niyoga* within contemporary Nepali Hindu society today is inconceivable where any sexual relationships outside of a marriage or even before marriage are ostracized. Kunti’s and Madri’s sexual union with Gods outside of their marriage and engaging in non-monogamous unions deviates from the established norm of ‘monogamy’ and ‘faithfulness’ whereby multiple transgressions take place at the same time. Although Pandu approves of these unions to bear him an heir, such unions outside of marriage for a wife are unacceptable in contemporary Hindu society where wife figures would be extremely ostracized and rendered as having ‘loose morals’ and who brings shame to herself and the family including the husband; not to mention that having a child before marriage or even being in any form of sexual relationship prior to marriage is still stigmatized in Nepali Hindu society. This points to

the increased rigidity within the norms on marriage, reproduction, and sexuality in Hinduism today where alternate ways of producing children, be it surrogacy, *niyoga*, or other advanced reproductive technologies, are stigmatized in comparison to the practice of *niyoga* in ancient times which was then considered ethically acceptable.

In Hinduism, marriage is defined as a sacred union between a ‘man’ and a ‘woman’ and forms a crucial part of the socio-religious discourse. Marriage therefore becomes the key institution that upholds and privileges heteronormativity. Marriage in Hinduism is ‘divine’ in nature and thus comprised of moral values and duties for the married couple (Bhattacharya, 1992). Bhattacharya (1992) outlines that the principal duty of any husband and wife is to ‘procreate progeny’. Seemingly, Sage Dhurvasa can foresee the future for Kunti and Pandu as he blesses her with the mantra which enables her to ‘obtain progeny’. There is a strong emphasis on ‘progeny’ within this narrative on account of which Kunti’s non-monogamous sexual union with gods is justified and understood. This narrative of ‘Kunti and the birth of Pandavas’ itself has been originated and structured in such a way that it attaches positive and favorable subjectivity to it. Words such as ‘radiance’ and ‘celestials’ assign the narrative with an approving meaning as it translates into something heavenly and divine which is intrinsically good and admissible within Hindu society.

Furthermore, a literal understanding of ‘spell’ is incantation where some sort of magic/sorcery is involved which can not only be used in a positive context but also in a negative one where it gets translated as a curse. If not for the emphasis on ‘progeny’, this spell could also have been read as a curse as opposed to a blessing where Kunti is condemned to invoke gods; but in this narrative the ‘spell’ is essentially good and used for a divine cause (i.e. progeny) allowing Kunti’s union to gods outside her marriage as admissible and acceptable for the purpose of

reproduction. Since Pandu cannot consummate the marriage with his wives Kunti and Madri due to the fatal curse, both Kunti's and Madri's unions outside the marriage with multiple gods is important and necessary to be able to produce heirs to the throne and therefore morally justified within the epic and Hindu discourse. Kunti's union with the gods also took place with the consent of her husband, Pandu, hence it is not looked upon as infidelity against Pandu himself. The emphasis of this tale has been on 'progeny', which is an essential attribute for any married woman.

The birth of the Pandavas, the main characters of the epic stems from an 'unconventional' and 'out of normal' union. The blessing imparted by Sage Dhurvasa places an immense power in Kunti whereby she can explore and enjoy her sexuality at her will and accord. As Sage Dhurvasa mentions that Kunti shall obtain progeny through the radiance of 'celestial beings', it is implied that there is more than a single celestial being whom Kunti invokes. If the focus of the narrative were solely to rest on progeny, one would think that Kunti would not need to invoke any more gods once she had given birth to her first son, Yudhistira. Therefore, a queer feminist perspective allows the readers to see Kunti as an empowered female character whose sexuality remains unrestricted by the dominant norms on marriage such as chastity and monogamy. Kunti's use of mantra is comparable to goddesses within Hinduism where they gain power to summon/attract the ascetic *yogi* (hermit) through *tapas* (intense meditation). Such narratives showcase the power of female sexuality which is capable of alluring powerful deities within Hinduism. However, sexuality still remains a taboo subject in contemporary Nepali society whereby it is only men who are allowed to talk about, explore, and enjoy their sexuality. Sexual agency has always been inconceivable for women when they are expected to comply with respective male counterparts and their sexual impulses. Kunti's ability to act on her sexual

desires and ‘invoke’ her god of desire carries strong feminist connotations whereby she is unrestricted to exercise, explore, and enjoy her sexuality and sexual desires defying the existing restrictions imposed upon female bodies, sexuality, and pleasure today. However, the dominant interpretation of the epic takes the sexual and bodily agency away from Kunti and presents it as a fulfillment of a moral obligation as a dutiful wife to achieve ‘progeny’.

Although Kunti’s union with the Sun god is considered to be not in conformity with the laws of morality since she was an unmarried virgin when she engaged in a pre-marital sexual encounter, such moral and sexual transgression is however justified within the Hindu religious discourse on *Mahabharata* as it maintains that unions with heavenly gods are not ‘*adharmā*’ but ‘*dharma*’ itself. Within Hinduism, gods are above all immoral actions. Even though Kunti invoked the sun god, Surya, by accident, she is compelled to cohabit with the sun god and honor the *mantra*. Given her qualms about the sexual act and her questioning of morality, while engaging in a sexual act before marriage, Surya emphasizes the “righteousness of a virgin’s right to cohabit with a person of her choice” (Shah, 2012, p. 70). He further maintains that by cohabiting with any individual of her choice, she is not transgressing any ‘*dharma*’. The sun deity outlines the untrammelled desires of both male and female and mentions that it is nothing but human nature and anything otherwise is known as perverse (Shah, 2012). Despite engaging in a pre-marital sexual relationship and bearing a son out of wedlock, coupled with her polyamorous unions with gods other than her husband, Kunti stands as an ideal figure for women and mothers in Hinduism.

The sexual and moral transgressions carried out by Kunti is admissible and justified on the account of ‘progeny’ and remains a topic that is not much deliberated upon while delving into the issues of womanhood, sexuality, and morality within Hinduism. Kunti’s narrative also

highlights the fact that womanhood is directly associated with marriage and progeny whereby it is looked upon as a 'natural' function for women. Motherhood is the prescribed script and '*dharma*' for any women which also imbues heterosexuality and marriage. Feminist theories have been critical of such naturalistic explanations of sex, gender and sexuality which assume certain social meanings and roles for women based on their physiology (Butler, 1988). "In distinguishing sex from gender, feminist theorists have disputed causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women's experience" (Butler, 1988, p. 520). Kunti's lived experiences have also been reduced to and understood in terms of her sex and gendered identity, where the narrative of motherhood and her duty as a wife takes precedence over her individuality.

Queer theory poses a critique of anything that is oppressively normal (Mann, 2012). By invoking several gods and having sexual unions with them, Kunti deviates from the dominant and so-called 'natural', 'normal' script for a Hindu wife and women in general who are expected to engage in a monogamous heterosexual relationship with their husbands through the institution of marriage. Kunti's polyamorous relationship and bearing of children who are not fathered by her husband goes against the existing social norms around chastity and morality. Kunti challenges the essentialized notions on womanhood and motherhood within the Hindu discourse by transgressing the dominant and fixed ideals on sex, marriage, and reproduction. Such essentializing ideals on wifedom, womanhood, and motherhood in general are gendered and associated with femininity. Such ideals are created and sustained through repetitive social performances of gender that associate certain traits, characteristics, and ideals with an essential sex (Butler, 1988). Kunti engages in pre-marital sex, bears a child out of wedlock, engages in polyamory where she engages with multiple partners apart from her husband and gives birth to

children who are not fathered by her lawful husband; hence we can see how far Kunti deviates from the ‘normal’ and dominant script and ideal that exists up to now for a Hindu wife, mother, and a woman.

Regardless, Kunti is considered to be one of the revered female protagonists of the epic, the Queen mother of Pandavas, and a powerful matriarch known for her strong values and diligence in mentoring and nurturing the Pandavas. The accounts of Kunti’s sexual and moral transgressions out of her marriage have been carefully straightened, marginalized, and underrepresented within contemporary retellings of *Mahabharata*. It normalizes and fits Kunti’s narrative within the monogamous heteronormative paradigms of contemporary Hindu society. Although Kunti’s sexuality and marriage defy the normative conventional idea of sexuality, marriage, and progeny, her narrative today represents a straightened effect (Ahmed, 2006).

4.2 Draupadi and her marriage to the Pandavas:

Draupadi is the heroine of the epic, known for her beauty and strong will and is the daughter of King Drupada. In order to find a suitor for Draupadi, King Drupada arranges an archery contest. Legend has it that King Drupada had always wished for Arjuna to marry his daughter and hence deliberately arranges the archery contest as he keeps Arjuna as a prospective suitor in his mind. Arjuna’s archery skill is legendary in *Mahabharata* where his shooting ability is unsurpassed by anyone in the epic. The contest is extremely challenging and only Arjuna is able to hit the mark and win Draupadi as his wife. During this time, Arjuna and his brothers are living in a forest in exile with their mother, Kunti. They live incognito disguising their true identities as hermits to the people and community around them. When Arjuna with other Pandavas reach home with Draupadi, he mentions that he was able to obtain ‘*bhikshya*’ (alms) that day. Kunti without looking at what her son was referring to, says “share equally, all of you,

whatever you have got” (Narasimhan, 1965, p. 37). Draupadi is therefore shared by all five brothers as they were obliged to honor their mother’s words. It is mentioned that Draupadi in her previous life had wished for a husband who had five different virtues and qualities with Lord Shiva. Lord Shiva grants her this wish but mentions that it is not possible to have all those virtues in a human and she is destined to marry five husbands with five different virtues that she had prayed for. Although it was Arjuna who had won her in the contest as his bride, all five brothers marry Draupadi and share her.

Queer/Feminist Interpretation of the text:

By comparing ‘Draupadi’ to ‘*bhikshya*’ or alms, Arjuna assigns Draupadi with a noble and moral meaning. This is the dominant understanding that pervades the socio-religious interpretation of the narrative. The literal understanding of *bhikshya* is alms, an object of selfless giving. By referring to Draupadi as alms, Draupadi becomes the ‘object’ of charity, a part of the noble and selfless act of giving which is praised within Hinduism. It is customary that you accept *bhikshya* when offered and it is considered discourteous when people refuse it. Without knowing, Kunti orders the sons to share the *bhikshya*, (i.e. Draupadi) equally amongst the five brothers. The brothers therefore share Draupadi amongst themselves as they see her as alms first before seeing her as their wife. It is through this shared institution of marriage that the Pandavas and Draupadi are fulfilling their *dharma*.

Polyandry is not a common practice in Hinduism. Historically, it was common for a husband to have more than one wife but not vice-versa. Although fraternal polyandry among Himalayan Tibetans was once practiced among Buddhists in Nepal, the tradition is forbidden and no longer exists (Luintel, 2004). Monogamy and heterosexuality is the norm when it comes to marriage in Nepali societies whereby it is not normal to have more than one spouse. It is far

more rare for a wife to have multiple husbands than it is for a husband as it might potentially get translated as an imbalance in power dynamics between husband and wife where it is a given that males have and are entitled to have more power compared to their female counterparts in any relationship. Hindu beliefs are known to endorse patriarchal values where men are upheld to a higher status than women where it is more acceptable for men to have multiple wives than the other way around.

The story of Draupadi and Pandavas is an exception where the motive of such polyandrous marriage is considered as moral and virtuous. As an obedient son, Arjuna in this narrative is thought to be fulfilling his *dharma* by honoring his mother's request to share alms (i.e. Draupadi) equally amongst his brothers. This practice is not seen as immoral or irreligious whereas Draupadi is held in high regard for her virtue and loyalty to her husbands. Her conduct and devotion to her husbands earned her a status among five remarkable women from the epic as one of the '*Panchakanya*' (Narasimhan, 1965). It is believed that she sacrificed her own interest by marrying five Pandavas as she is only in love with Arjuna. She is known for her boldness, patience, and resolution (Bhattacharya, 1992). Despite the polyandry, this narrative reiterates the dominant tropes of an ideal Hindu woman and a wife whose outlining virtues are selflessness, loyalty, tolerance, altruism, and whose duty is to serve her husband and please him. Draupadi does not have a say in the matter at all and lives on with a conviction that her fate is sealed. She does not resist the idea that she is to have a polyandrous marriage with five Pandavas although she was initially only married to Arjuna in the epic. She does not voice her opinions or concerns on the matter and resorts to the 'situation' as it unfolds.

The analogy of 'Draupadi' to '*bhikshya*' drawn by Arjuna who had recently married her is somewhat representative of the status of women and wives in Hindu societies. By comparing

Draupadi to alms, Arjuna diminishes the status of Draupadi from a princess and a wife to a mere object of charity and devalues her. In doing so, Arjuna takes agency away from Draupadi as he grounds Draupadi's individuality within a patriarchal framework by commodifying Draupadi and assigning a distorted meaning to her. Draupadi's status as a woman and a wife is further denounced by the Pandavas when Yudhistira, the eldest of the five Pandava brothers, gambles Draupadi away to their arch rival the Kauravas in the gambling game of dice. Draupadi again becomes equivalent of property and an object to bet and gamble with. Such objectification reflects the insignificant status of women in Hindu societies where their identities are continuously determined, challenged, subverted, and erased by various systems of oppression including patriarchy and heteronormativity. Women in Hindu societies are often not recognized for themselves, but rather seen in relation to their male counterparts as wives, daughters, sisters, mothers, etc.

The five brothers, Pandavas, who are the protagonists of the epic are married to 'Draupadi, which translates into a polyamorous and a non-monogamous matrimonial relationship (Pattanaik, 2010) that directly queers the institution of marriage in the context of Hindu society. Marriage in Nepal is predominantly monogamous whereby polygamy is forbidden and is punishable by law in Nepal. Historically, however, it has been practiced in Nepali society where it is common for a man to have multiple wives but rarely the other way around (Luintel, 2004). In this narrative, there is a reverse within such relations and its dynamics where it is Draupadi who has multiple spouses. Having multiple husbands or marrying more than once for a woman in Nepal is extremely ostracized and rare. Concepts of monogamy, chastity, and loyalty are concomitant with married women in Nepal where a vast majority of women have a single partner/husband throughout their life, even when they are separated or divorced from their

former partner/husband. For a woman, marrying more than once and having more than one husband/partner is considered frivolous and sexually depraved where a woman's 'character', 'values', and 'morale' is questioned.

Draupadi challenges the dominant narratives on marriage and womanhood present within Hindu societies in Nepal by marrying more than one man. As a wife, she challenges the 'normality' of wifedom and the institution of marriage by being married to five men at once and queers the essentialist understanding and the fixed identity of a 'wife' which are seen as parallel with loyalty and monogamy. Similar to the way Butler (1990) points to the culturally constructed nature of gendered identity, the roles and meanings of a woman in Hindu societies are also socio-culturally mediated. Such socio-cultural construction of gendered identity has created 'natural' functions for women and their role as a daughter, wife, mother, etc. As Draupadi deviates from the 'normal' script for a married Hindu woman, she challenges the normality of socially created and sanctioned ideas on marriage and wifedom. This points out to the socially constructed nature of not just gender but also human sexuality where certain sexual behaviors such as heterosexuality and monogamy are considered appropriate and normal over others. Butler (1988) mentions how "gender is established through the repetitive stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 519). Monogamy, loyalty, and chastity are some of the traits and values of women in Hinduism that extends and applies as an abiding gendered self for women and female gender in general. Here Draupadi is not 'exclusive' and 'chaste' to any of her husbands and is engaged in polyandrous marital unions with five brothers. Not only does the narrative queer the practice of monogamy, but also holds the potential for queer homosexual nuances amongst the brothers.

Nevertheless, Draupadi's marital and sexual relationship to the five Pandavas is strictly seen in terms of a dutiful wife who adheres to her responsibilities to all five husbands. It fails to recognize the sexual agency Draupadi has and is able to enjoy in her polygynous marriage with multiple husbands. There is almost an implicit victimization of Draupadi that takes place within the narrative as she becomes the passive but dutiful and obedient wife to the Pandava brothers. There is also no conversation on pleasure and desire within the narrative be it about Draupadi or the Pandavas. The prevailing understanding of Draupadi's narrative today also embodies a 'straightened effect' (Ahmed, 2006) where her body and sexuality is oriented in such a way that it adheres to the dominant ideals on marriage, sexuality, and gender. Nevertheless, Draupadi remains an esteemed character within the epic and the religious discourse. Although her marriage to the five Pandavas brothers is circumstantial, her character is not denounced or questioned for her polyamorous relationship. To this date she is looked upon as a virtuous and ideal figure and enjoys equal eminence as the Pandavas and other heroic characters from the epic. However, such relationships where a woman is married to more than one man is intolerable and against the norm in the current Nepali Hindu society.

4.3 Arjuna's transition into Brihannala:

Several stories, mythologies, and tales within Hindu texts and scriptures including *Mahabharata* blur the line between sex and gender binaries. One such narrative is Arjuna's transition into a eunuch named Brihannala. While the Pandavas were sent into exile away from their kingdom for thirteen years in the forest, Arjuna is 'cursed' to live his final thirteenth year as transgender. Because of the curse, when Arjuna with other Pandavas enter their thirteenth and last year of exile, Arjuna transforms into a eunuch named Brihannala (Dutt, 2009). At the time, the Pandavas are at the kingdom of Matsya where they seek refuge with King Virata of Matsya.

Brihannala is appointed as the 'dance and music' tutor for King Virata's daughter, Princess Uttara. It is believed that Arjuna was well versed in singing and dancing and was trained by Chitrasena, a Gandharva king, in preparation for his transition into a eunuch after he was cursed. During that thirteenth year, Brihannala lived at the palace with the princess and other women.

Queer/Feminist interpretation:

Arjuna's transition into Brihannala is understood in terms of the 'curse' which compels him to live under disguise as a eunuch for a year. There is therefore not much deliberation on the transition and fluidity that takes place within Arjuna's sexuality and gender roles. The shift that takes place within Arjuna's sexuality and gender is equated with a 'curse'. A literal understanding of curse is a malicious spell inflicted upon with the intention to harm and punish someone; hence the transition Arjuna goes through is not viewed as something positive, but rather an undesirable consequence of the curse he has been subjected to. It is for this reason the gender and sexual metamorphosis of Arjuna into Brihannala is considered anything but desirable. The crux of this storyline lies on the curse whereby the narrative is strictly rationalized and interpreted in terms of the curse that Arjuna has been subjected to. Arjuna's transformation into a eunuch is understood as a deviation from the gender norm within the dominant discourse.

As Brihannala transitions back into Arjuna when the curse is lifted, the fluidity and complexity of Arjuna's gender and sexuality is straightened, normalized, simplified and seen in heteronormative terms again. Ahmed (2006) talks about 'compulsory heterosexuality' and how it is enacted within the dominant discourse where human bodies, their gender, and sexuality are oriented in a certain way towards certain lines and compelled to fit within a heteronormative framework especially when they are found to express queer desires and deviate from straight lines (p. 23). Brihannala's narrative is representative of the straightening process that has taken

place in terms of their gender and sexuality as it is Arjuna's gender and sexuality that is considered as 'natural' or 'real' whereby Brihannala's sexual and gender identity is conveniently dismissed from the dominant discourse and considered 'non-normative'. Butler (1990) busts the illusion of the 'real' and 'natural' gender by pointing to the "discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or a 'natural sex' is produced and established as prediscursive" (p. 7). It is, in fact, the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (p. 33). Gender is as real as it is performative and therefore to say Arjuna's gender and sexuality is 'essential', 'true', and 'real' whereas Brihannala's is subservient, transitory, and extrinsic would be a paradox.

Even today Arjuna is viewed as one of the most celebrated protagonists from the epic who is best known as a warrior. The fact that he went through gender metamorphosis and lived as a transgender being named 'Brihannala' is not deliberated upon much in the discussion of his character. There is a careful omission of the complexity of gender and sexuality that takes place within Arjuna's character among the Hindus as they do not delve further and speculate on the issue. The narrative of Brihannala and the gender and sexual fluidity of Arjuna remain marginalized within the dominant understanding of Arjuna amongst the Hindus where Arjuna's sexuality and gender are eventually straightened and oriented along the lines of heterosexuality and masculinity.

Arjuna's transition to Brihannala for a year and reverting back to himself within the narrative shows the fluidity present within the epic in terms of gender, sex, and sexuality. Basu (2004) mentions that bodies can be temporarily altered to a given social or psychological need and even gods approve of such ability to revert back from a prescribed gender role and sexuality.

Arjuna's transition showcases such temporality and fluidity of human bodies, sexuality, sex and gender that defies the 'natural' and 'rigid' ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality (Butler, 1990). A queer feminist interpretation would argue that as opposed to a curse, Arjuna has instead received a 'blessing' which allows him to alter his gender and sexuality, experience the gender and sexual fluidity at his will and defy the rigidity that was earlier present within him.

Traditionally, singing and dancing have been stereotyped to specific gender roles and were mostly relegated to women. Princesses were trained for singing and dancing whereas princes were trained in archery, horse-riding, shooting, etc. By training for singing and dancing and taking lessons from Chitrasena, Arjuna as a male prince challenges the conventional gender roles within the art of dancing and singing during the era. Following his transition into Brihannala, Arjuna steps into the role of dance and music trainer for the princess and other women in the palace. Arjuna's transition here does not take place only in terms of a physiological change of sex but also a change in terms of gender. As he transforms into Brihannala, he shifts from masculine to feminine exhibiting the fluid nature of gender roles that were practiced by Arjuna as Brihannala. Butler (1990) calls out to such performative nature of gender and emphasizes that gender is not an inherent and stable identity. Moreover, Butler (1998) mentions that gender is rather an identity that is created over time "through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 519) which produces the effect of a static, natural, or true gender. The fact that Arjuna seamlessly slips into Brihannala's character in terms of both gender and sexuality highlights the fact that gender and sexuality are indeed not rigid. His ability to switch his gender and sexuality and transition smoothly queers the dominant understanding of it which is viewed as rigid and static; hence this repetitive enactment of gender and sexuality establishes it as natural and normal for specific bodies to have a specific gender and sexuality.

The fact that Arjuna is married to Draupadi also troubles our heterosexual understanding of their marriage as Arjuna's other avatar or form is Brihannala who identifies as a transgender female. Both Arjuna's and Draupadi's lines of sexuality are blurred as it extends beyond just heterosexuality. This not only complicates Arjuna's and Draupadi's sexuality but also the other four Pandava brothers as they are all instituted within the same marital relationship. It can therefore be argued that this blurs the straight lines of heterosexuality not only for Arjuna but also for Draupadi and the remaining Pandava brothers.

4.4 Aravan

Aravan, also known as Iravan, is the son of Arjuna and Ulupi (the Naga serpent princess) who plays a crucial role in ensuring the victory of the Pandavas in the great war within the epic. Aravan, who wishes for a heroic death, sacrifices himself in the war while he is fighting on behalf of the Pandavas against Kauravas. However, before Aravan sacrifices himself, he expresses his desire to get married the night before and consummate the marriage. Knowing that Aravan would sacrifice himself in the great *Kurukshetra* war the next day and die, no woman agreed to marry him as it would mean widowhood the very next day and also for the rest of her life. It is important to note that widows in Hindu societies face extreme discrimination and widowhood in itself is highly stigmatized. Widows are expected to live a life of mourning where social norms prevent them from remarrying and leading a happy life (Chakravarti, 2003). Realizing this to be a challenge, Lord Krishna who is also known as another avatar of Lord Vishnu, takes a female form of Mohini and fulfills Aravan's wish by marrying him and consummating the marriage. Following Aravan's sacrificial death the next day, Mohini grieves as his widow where she breaks her bangles and beats her breasts as she cries and mourns.

Queer/Feminist interpretation:

Marriage is the key takeaway in this narrative where it takes precedence over Aravan's sexual yearning. Aravan's wish for marriage before his sacrificial death in the great war of *Kurukshetra* is interpreted as Aravan's desire to fulfill his *dharma* in life and receive honorary death rites and cremation following his death which was not granted to unmarried men who were instead buried. Marriage thus becomes crucial for Aravan who is certain to sacrifice himself in the war and die the very next day. It is therefore Aravan's appeal for marriage before his death is considered reasonable on the grounds of *dharma* which would ultimately entitle him to proper death rites and is not read as having sexual desires.

'Mohini' is the female avatar of Lord Krishna who is known for her enchanting beauty. Mohini uses her illusory sexuality to allure and charm both demons and gods alike. She is also noted for her use of sexuality as a weapon to seduce and destroy Bhasmasura, the ash demon. Mohini's sexuality is seen as parallel with the need of the hour, be it to seduce and destroy demons or provide sexual pleasure and gratification to the characters within the epic. The transition that take place within Lord Krishna as he transforms into Mohini is simplified and understood in terms of devout alteration needed to fulfill '*dharma*' and ensure the sustainability of the world; it occurs and is justified on a need basis to save the day.

Aravan's adamant longing for marriage denotes his desire and need for sex and pleasure. An explicit expression of need or desire for any kind of sexual pleasure and gratification is a huge taboo in Hindu societies still to this day. Having sexual desire and urgency in itself is equated with perversity and immorality. General thoughts around sexual desire, pleasure, and impulse are not found within the dominant language where people do not talk about these issues in the open. Partaking in sexual pleasure and gratification or even discussing it is repugnant for

the majority of Hindus. Sex is understood in terms of marital duty and '*dharma*' in order to give continuity to life and family. As the marital relationship is the only sanctioned sexual union between a man and a woman in Hindu society, Aravan's appeal for marriage can be understood as a plea for sex. The dominant discourse, however, does not look into the issue of sexual desire and pleasure whereas marriage is looked upon as an institution that exists strictly for the sustenance of family life and reproduction. It is worth noting that the marital union of Aravan and Mohini is to grant sexual gratification and pleasure to Aravan before he dies. Here, marriage does not take place for progeny but to satiate the sexual desire and need of Aravan. This queers the conservative mindset of Hindus in contemporary society where any deliberation on pleasure and sexual gratification is considered immoral, vulgar, and seen as a deviation from '*dharma*' itself. Aravan's narrative also suggests the possibility for homoerotic nuances between the soldiers who fought in the war of *Kurukshetra* when faced with the possibility of death in the battlefield.

Furthermore, the fact that Mohini is actually an avatar of Lord Vishnu and Lord Krishna, who are both known as prominent male deities within Hinduism carries the potential for homoeroticism between these male deities and Aravan. The fact that Mohini consummates the marriage with Aravan can be read as a non-heteronormative sexual union which also queers their marriage and sexuality. Such forms of queerness disrupt the rigid and heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality that are seen in binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine and including the binary understanding of heterosexuality/homosexuality. Lord Krishna's ability to revert back and forth from his masculine form to the avatar of Mohini challenges the fixed notions of identity, gendered and sexual, and questions the 'normality' or 'truthfulness' of Lord Krishna's gender and sexuality.

Within Hindu theology, androgyny, hermaphrodites, demigods, transsexualism, homoeroticism, and liminal characters have always existed who obscure and queer the gender and sexual binaries. The trinity gods, the supreme deities of Hindu religion, Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Brahma are also known for transcending these boundaries in their various 'avatars'. Butler (1988) outlines the temporality of gender and mentions that it is in no way a stable identity and points to the culturally constructed nature of it. It is, in fact, the 'stylized repetitions of acts' that gives an illusion of 'real' or 'natural' gendered self.

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking of subversive repetition of that style (Butler, 1988, p. 520).

Such transgression and lack of uniformity in gender have in fact been enacted by various gods, goddesses, and characters within Hinduism proving that gender is indeed performative, fluid, and discursively produced.

Representations of a fluid notion of sexuality and having gender-variant deities within Hindu mythology to an extent celebrates, validates, and normalizes the existing discourse on queerness, queer bodies, and sexualities that are being enacted within contemporary Hindu societies in both India and Nepal. Based on the legend of Aravan, there is a celebration of transgenders and transvestites in Koovagam, a village located in Tamil Nadu, in the southern part of India every year. Transgender communities come together to celebrate Aravan, who is known as the 'patron god of transgender communities' where they reenact the story by visualizing themselves as Mohini whereby the priest marries them to Aravan in the Koothandavar temple which is dedicated to Aravan. The next day, the transgenders' mourn the death of Aravan by

breaking bangles and also participating in ritualistic dances. In addition to the Koovagam festival, there are other celebrations such as Ayyappa and Chamayavillaku in Kerala, Bahuchara-Mata in Gujrat and Yellamma-Devi in Karnataka observed within India where the gender-variant deities found within Hindu mythology are worshipped. Such religious observations are now followed by beauty contests and similar programs among transgenders. Hindu deities and festivals like this also hold great social and cultural value for Hijras in India where they are often marginalized and discriminated based on their gender (Roy, 2014).

Such mythological figures and narratives play a vital role in theorizing and legitimizing queer identities such as the ‘Hijras’ and transgender bodies within Hindu societies both in Nepal and India. By acknowledging and validating their presence in various religious accounts as *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagavad Gita* grants sanction to queer bodies and their existence which to an extent normalizes the discourse around queer sexuality and bodies and assuages their social status. Legends around gender fluid characters, especially the myth about Bahuchara Mata, the transgender goddess worshipped by the Hijras, and discussion of *Tritiya Prakriti*, a third gender and sexuality form an integral part of the Hindu texts. It is through such queer representations, both queer and non-queer bodies are able to conceptualize the notion of ‘queer sexuality’. Hijras mirror such mythological narratives in forming their own identities (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2015).

4.5 Situating lived experiences within the text:

The concept of gender and sexual fluidity that exists within the ancient Hindu religious texts and discourse such as *Mahabharata* does not resonate with a majority of the Nepali people who perceive gender and sex as something rigid that can only exist in heteronormative binaries. Neither the general social attitude of Nepali people towards the queer population is reflective of

the fluidity that exists in the Hindu texts, nor is the legal framework which recognizes all gender and sexuality as equal. There is a strong pressure to conform to the heteronormative conventions of the society. The prejudice, harassment, violence, and discrimination LGBTQ populations face in Nepal on an everyday basis is proof that those who do not adhere to such social conventions are not tolerated and are marginalized (Boyce & Coyle, 2013). Any form of queerness is not acceptable within the larger Hindu society in Nepal whereby it is looked upon as an aberration of social norms and values whereby the non-heteronormative queer individuals in Nepal rarely “come out of the closet” and those who do, are often disowned by the family, community, and society as they are highly stigmatized (Greene, 2015).

Many individuals who are engaged in non-heterosexual relationships or identify as non-binary queers are also known to be involved in heterosexual relationships and marriages (Boyce & Coyle, 2013). Confirming to such social institutions of heterosexuality such as marriage allows queer individuals to practice their sexuality and enact on their queer desires and at the same time pass the heteronormative conventions on gender and sexuality within larger society. Munoz (1999) identifies this phenomenon as ‘disidentification’, which creates a space for ‘minoritarian subjects’ such as people of color/queers of color to situate themselves in history and seize social agency by resisting the dominant narratives, fixed dispositions, and socially constituted definitions. Munoz (1999) further mentions that identities and bodies are a constant site of struggle and resistance where said minoritarian subjects must either work with or resist the conditions created by dominant cultures. Many queer individuals in Nepal partake in this process of ‘disidentification’ as they conform to the social norms of society such as heteronormativity, sexual and gender binaries, and marriage and furthermore within that process simultaneously find space to be queer and enact queerness. Such queer bodies politicize the

process of disidentification to recognize the ‘identities-in-difference’ that fail to adhere to the essentialized notions and understandings of ‘self’ and ‘identity’. The minoritarian subjects are thus seen as the ‘cultural performers’ who must ‘perform’ accordingly within a fixed identity disposition and socially encoded roles that are prescribed for such subjects (Munoz, 1999). In doing so, Munoz reinstates the performative aspect of gender and sexual identity and challenges the known rigidity of it. The process of disidentification also entails a straightening process where bodies take part in a reenactment or performance of self that conforms to the socially sanctioned identities which often include adjusting and orienting bodies towards straight lines of heteronormativity (Ahmed, 2006). It is within such processes of disidentification that queer bodies in Nepal continue to navigate the contours of heteronormativity today.

The social discourse on gender, sex, and sexuality today have given rise to a certain ideology and practice that privileges heterosexuality and marginalizes queerness which was not always the case. As mentioned before, fluid ideas on sex, gender, and sexuality were present during pre-colonial times whereas ancient Hindu literature makes direct reference to queer practices and queer forms of sexuality and gender. *Vedas* even mentions the existence of a society that was marked by a ‘non-hierarchical and non-gendered social order’ (Shah, 2012). However, such fluid understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality are not present today and Hindu religion itself is associated with heterosexuality and morality. The present retellings and interpretations of the narratives and the stories from *Mahabharata* within Hindu socio-religious discourse are fit within the straight lines of heterosexuality where there is no discussion or theorization on queer bodies and sexualities. It is therefore important to critically think how sex, gender, and sexuality have been historically defined, how those definitions have changed over time, and how various systems, norms, institutions came to play and enforced dominant ideas on

sexuality and gender marking a clear distinction between normative and non-normative practices. Such changes within the socio-cultural discourse points to the fact that gender and sexuality is in fact a social construct whose meanings and definitions have been mediated.

Althusser (1971) introduced the term ‘interpellation’ which can be understood as ‘calling out’ or the process of ‘hailing’ people within social interactions by the dominant ideology into their assigned roles and identities (that is presumed to be natural or obvious). By distinguishing queer sexuality and practices as a deviation from so-called normative practices, the dominant Hindu society participates in the process of interpellation (Althusser, 1971) where it calls out on queer bodies and identities and offers heterosexuality as the normative or ‘natural’ line of orientation to be followed. Queer identities are subject to a continual interpellation in the present day Hindu society where heteronormative ideology is dominant, powerful, and hegemonic. However, as the dominant discourse partakes in this process of interpellation, it itself becomes subject to the process of ‘interpellation’ as it is the dominant discourse which is hailed and called out to the heteronormative ideology in the first place. Thus, it is crucial to note that it is heteronormativity, the powerful and dominant ideology that precedes over Hindu society who like the rest of the people are “always-already interpellated subjects” (Althusser, 1971). As the aforementioned narratives showcase the ways in which queerness, queer practices, and characters within *Mahabharata* have been dismissed and understood in terms of a heteronormative framework, Hindu religious discourse has also become a subject to heteronormative interpellation.

In Nepali context, it is crucial that we look at the intersection of religion, society, and social norms while deliberating on the issue of queer sexuality and gender given that religion and social norms form a large part of the discourse. Despite the fact that Hinduism extends

recognition to sexual fluidity and alternate forms of sexualities, Hindu religious discourse today in Nepal disregards all forms of queerness and equates it with depravity. Such a paradox points to the inherent discrepancy and also raises questions about the way Hinduism is being practiced and understood today. It is important to challenge the heteronormativity of Hindu religious texts such as *Mahabharata* which is considered to be a repository of the socio-cultural and moral heritage of Hindu societies. Reading *Mahabharata* from a different perspective such as a queer feminist theoretical lens nuances our understanding of gender and sexuality with respect to Hindu religion, religious texts, and its meanings. It allows us to think critically about the ways Hindu religion and religious texts have informed the discourse on sex, gender, and sexuality and trouble the dominant interpretations and understandings of it.

As outlined above, engaging in a queer feminist reading of some of the narratives from *Mahabharata* showcases the ways queerness have been enacted within Hinduism where transsexuality, polyamory, homoeroticism, gender, and sexual fluidity is present. Such instances exemplify the fluid and astatic nature and understanding of sex and sexuality that transcends dominant and heterosexual norms. However, if we deliberate on those queer themes within the present day Hindu society in Nepal and contextualize it within the daily socio-religious discourse of Nepali people, none of the aforementioned practices are condoned by the larger Hindu society today. Meanwhile, it is also important to note the existing complexities within these narratives and Hindu religious texts at large that have elements of both heteronormative and queer/transgressive sexual and gendered relations which might be viewed as liberating and accepting of queer gender and sexuality in some instances while heteronormative and oppressive in others.

Chapter 5

5.1 Bridging the two discourse:

It is crucial to look into the paradox of Hindu religion that celebrates queerness within its ancient literature and tradition in the past and the way Hindu religious discourse today marginalizes queer bodies and sexualities. It is also important to note that such hegemonic readings of Hindu epics such as *Mahabharata* leads to systemic oppression of alternate forms of sexuality and gender that are present within Hindu societies today. Appropriating Hindu texts and discourse to fit the heteronormative standards imposed by colonial ideals coupled with Hindu nationalist values on gender and sexuality assigns a distorted meaning to Hindu traditions, culture, and literature such as *Mahabharata* and gives a rather incomplete interpretation of it. Hence engaging in new ways of thinking and deliberating on Hindu texts such as *Mahabharata* can provide us with new meanings and messages.

Being open to new ways of thinking such as a re-imagination of *Mahabharata* from a queer feminist perspective, nuancing one's understanding and perception of religion, religious texts, and the way it informs human sexuality might translate into lived-experiences of people where hegemonic understandings and practices of gender and sexuality can be contested and queer bodies and queerness itself can co-exist and be a part of the discourse. By drawing attention to the Hindu narratives and resources that admits queerness, introducing it within the mainstream social Hindu discourse can be one of the many ways to resist heteronormativity in present-day Hindu societies. This could eventually translate into social norms and values as Hindu religion and texts directly contribute to the socio-cultural discourse of the Hindu people. Doing so can challenge the heteronormativity of Hindu religion, its hegemonic construction, and interpretation of gender and sexuality which is mostly understood and interpreted in binaries and

conforms to heteronormative ideals. Engaging in a queer feminist reading of the epic could result in a paradigm shift in thinking about gender and sexuality among Hindus. It could facilitate the process of opening up for queer possibilities and get rid of the rigidity that is currently present that plays out in the form of binaries when talking about gender and sexuality. As suggested by Epstein (2017), exploring the possibilities and meanings of re-writing Hindu religious texts such as *Mahabharata* from a queer feminist perspective which employs queer methods of translation can be another way of queering Hindu religious texts and resisting heteronormativity. There has been a rise in the number of projects that engage in a feminist re-imagination of the epic in the form of novels, plays, short stories, etc. which narrate the stories from the margin, situate, the sub-altern voices in the center, and use an intersectional lens to focus on the issues of gender relations, classism, caste-sim, patriarchy etc. that are at play within the epic (Sengupta, 2017). However, a re-imagination and rewriting of the epic with a specific focus on queerness, queer sexuality, and gender is still needed to subvert the heteronormativity that is inherent within the epic.

5.2 Conclusion:

Fluid notions of sexuality and gender have been a part of Hindu culture and religion where heterosexuality was not the norm. The aforementioned instances of various forms of queerness found within the characters in *Mahabharata* and other Hindu mythology show the fluidity and transformability of gender and sexuality which is now perceived as static, rigid, constant and seen only in terms of binaries. Contrary to Hindu discourse, particularly texts and myths which embody terms of gender and sexuality, the dominant discourse among Hindu societies today is seemingly fixed and seen exclusively within the binaries of male and female. The current understandings of sexuality and practice of heteronormativity within Hindu societies

show the paradigm shift that has taken place in terms of gender and sexual practice.

Heterosexuality has become the norm where any discussion and practice of alternate forms of sexuality is othered, marginalized, and silenced. The multitudes of queer themes that are present within Hindu religion are dismissed where there is less to no discussion or recognition of non-normative sexual practices within the dominant socio-cultural discourse.

Recognizing such fluidity of sex, gender, and sexuality found within the epic and in the larger Hindu religious discourse can introduce an alternative language and discourse around sex and sexuality that is not heteronormative or rigid. Using the language found within the epic on the subject of the fluid nature of sex and sexuality can play a crucial role in legitimizing and thus normalizing queer sexualities and practices. Challenging the single-narrative around Hindu religious understandings on gender and sexuality can disrupt the existing heteronormative norms and practices that are hegemonic within Hindu societies today.

Any deliberation on the issue of sex, gender, and sexuality needs to be contextualized within the socio-cultural and historical milieu of the given society; hence it is important to recognize the social processes, institutions, and structures that give rise to certain language and discourse, making it dominant while rendering others to the margin. It is also important to remember that within any dominant discourse there is an interplay of power and production of language/text that establishes certain ideologies and groups as powerful and dominant. “Every discourse is structured by dominance, every discourse is historically produced and interpreted where dominant structures are legitimated by ideologies of powerful people” (Wodak, 2001, p. 3). Various social structures and institutions such as family, marriage, social norms, law, education, religion, colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy, etc. play a crucial role in legitimizing dominant ideologies that are often hegemonic and oppressive. Furthermore, they frequently

marginalize alternative ideologies and discourses that co-exist, therefore engaging in ‘de-colonial’ ways that challenge the heteronormativity of *Mahabharata* and Hindu religion in general. Deliberating on the issues of gender and sexuality can create new ways for legitimizing queer understanding and expressions of gender and sexuality which have been negated and marginalized thus far in the contemporary Hindu society.

Likewise, it is also important to be critically aware of the inherent power structure within a language and the larger socio-cultural discourse that stabilizes heteronormative practices and conventions as the norm while oppressing and marginalizing queer bodies and sexualities. An understanding that is critical of such socio-culture discourse, institutions, processes and situates difference and power within it can illuminate new ways of thinking and engaging with queer sexualities and practices. Moving away from dominant language and understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality within Hinduism and challenging as well as ‘decolonizing’ one’s own rigid perception of gender and sexuality can open new avenue for queer communities within Hindu societies in Nepal and elsewhere and change the values and norms around gender and sexuality that are oppressively heteronormative. Moreover, alternate and new ways of becoming and doing queer that looks into the intersections of race, class, caste, religion, power, sexuality and other elements of difference and power should be explored within queer politics and discourse to create an enabling and inclusive environment for queer bodies and identities with diverse positionalities in Nepal.

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