

Tracing non-traditional Gender and Sexual Diversities in Star Plus's *Mahabharat* and Netflix's *Troy: Fall of a City*.



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Certificate of Approval

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

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Declaration

This thesis is a presentation of my original analytical work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

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Abstract:

This study is an attempt to trace the ubiquitous presence of non-traditional gender and sexual diversities in Netflix's- *Troy: Fall of a City* and Star Plus's- *Mahabharat*. They are the audio-visual adaptations, two canonical works from the classical period: Homer's- *The Iliad* and Ved Vyasa's Indian epic- *The Mahabharata* respectively. It projects a view to uncover how they represent their characters to reevaluate and question the construction and normalization of a patriarchal definition of masculinity, femininity, traditional gender roles and heteronormative standards. The objective of this work is to point out how these two series represent non-binaristic and diverse sexual and gender norms. Instead of locating the mere presence of non-binaristic characters, what this study aims to do is to look at the politics of their representation and explain how such representations reflect a change in the way we understand gender and sexual orientations today. The questions that this dissertation asks are as follows: What are the traits that distinguish one character's portrayal on screen from another? Do the selected characters understand their own "non-traditional" gender and sexuality? Have the makers done justice to the original epics while showcasing gender and sexual diversities? This study argues that while heteronormativity has been celebrated in these two TV/Web series, non-binaristic characters are also shown in a more positive manner. Thus, both these series have been able to escape the trap of fixed gender roles and heteronormative sexual expressions by showcasing alternative sexual practices and gender roles.

Key-words: Gender, Sexuality, Heteronormativity, Non-binaristic sexual orientations, Non-traditional gender roles, Hegemonic Masculinity.

Chapter- 1

Introduction – Understanding Gender and Sexuality

Gender is a social construct. It differs from biological sex which makes the concept of gender of “man” and “woman” associating gender roles within them a social construct as well. Even though there is not only one type of masculinity or femininity but several others, patriarchy forms a hegemonic form of masculinity and femininity which influences and pressurizes men and women to follow certain type of standards, creating a socio-sexual hierarchy within the male members of the society (Harvey 296).

Alpha-masculinity refers to the traditional and patriarchal form of masculinity, also known as hegemonic masculinity (Harvey 296-297). An alpha male is a person from the male-sex who conforms to certain boxed standards which labels him as a man. Being socially and domestically dominant, aggressive, assertive, muscular and misogynistic are some of the characteristics of a standard alpha male. Following hegemonic masculinity, the alpha male’s actions and behavior are informed by patriarchal social laws and misogyny, enabling them to enjoy all male privileges and high standing in the male-hierarchy. Men who do not play this overly aggressive, dominant role both physically and mentally but still try to fit-in and follow the hegemonic masculine standards are labelled as beta male. Men who can’t identify themselves either as alpha or beta in terms of their “masculine” actions and prefer an alternative lifestyle are labelled as omega males. These are the three primary labels for men according to the standards of hegemonic alpha-masculinity (Harvey 297-298).

The idea of an alpha-male and his traditionally patriarchal standards are not something predominant only in the modern times. They have been in existence since the dawn of human civilizations. Almost all the ancient mega civilizations were patriarchal. They were required to believe that “men are superior to women” (Bradley 74). They can also be labeled as male-supremacists which literally means that they are the ones who believe in putting men on the top supreme spot in the hierarchy of power and domination (Beynon 96). Most of the prominent ancient civilizations and their literatures that we know of endorse an underlined male-supremacy. Greek and Indian are two such ancient civilizations where the expressions of patriarchal standards, male-supremacy are prevalent in their literature. One reason behind the persisting interest in the ancient world and their literature may also lie in this commonality.

Commonly accepted patriarchal gender roles have turned into “traditions” of such patriarchal cultures. Anything out of these standards are considered as “non-traditional”. Be it for a man or for a woman this socio-sexual measurement meter has not evolved much over centuries. For women within the patriarchal societies it is expected that they will be traditionally more submissive, physically weak, intellectually weak, polite, sexually inactive yet sublimely sexual, more accommodating and nurturing. Women are expected to stay home and take care of family and children even now. Patriarchal tradition confines women and expects them only to serve and submit to men as their slaves not as partners (Ahmed 152-154). Women are expected to dress and act in a “girly” and “feminine” manner where it means just to look submissive and polite against men. Patriarchy demands them to stay virgin before marriage yet wants them to look seductive in a “girly” way (Ahmed 155). These expectations are derived from the embedded patriarchy in our mythologies, histories and cultural norms narrated by a strictly patriarchal perspective.

Sexuality is just as diverse as gender. Gender is far more diverse than the assigned biological sex where sexuality has a broad spectrum of various orientations. Gender is more diverse than the binary box of cisgender male and cisgender female who identifies their own psychological state matching with their assigned sex. The non-binary genders include transgender, bigender, agender and many more. Gender does not always revolve around the assigned sex and sexuality and is not always heterosexual. There is homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, asexuality and many more within bottlenose dolphins, black swans, several species of primates including human beings, etc. (Ahmed 1-2). Our societies have been implementing and normalizing heterosexual orientation of one's sexuality through books, social attitudes, films, series and through almost every media of communication. Heteronormativity is one common theme of blockbuster hit movies and TV series while washing away and erasing any possible trace of "non-traditional" homosexuality and bisexuality. Be it Hollywood or Bollywood, none have successfully changed this heteronormative norm or even created a broader platform to create mainstream films and shows showcasing the diverse spectrum of sexuality. Slowly this trend is changing within the OTT platforms such as Netflix, ALT Balaji, Disney Plus Hotstar etc. (India Forums).

This study is an attempt to trace non-traditionality through the representation of non-binaristic characters in the two TV/Web series that are direct adaptations of the Greek epic- *The Iliad* and the Indian epic- *The Mahabharata*. A study of characterization shows, both series contain leading male-protagonists and antagonists who fit the box of traditional-masculinity and alpha-male standards. They contain traces of alpha-beta dichotomy within ancient Greece and ancient India. Apart from the stereotypical representation they also have some characters those break the loop and go beyond the traditional views of gender and heteronormativity. Going beyond the mere

presence of these characters, what this study aims to do is to look at the politics of their representation by these two series.

Thus, the questions this study aims to address are: What are the primary traits common to these men and women?, How have these men been presented against other kinds of men?. By close reading, this study aims to find expressions of what constitutes to pull out some of the characters and highlight their non-traditionality in the series, how the alpha male traits are presented in comparison to beta male traits and the politics inherent in their representations and its impact on the evolution of the concept of gender and sexuality.

Before going into this investigation itself, it will be beneficial to have a brief discussion on the various types of genders, masculinities and sexualities that inform this thesis. Since the discourse on gender and sexuality is an ever-evolving one, giving rise to newer but related concepts, the typology and specific terminologies used in the thesis will be referring to the following understanding of gender, sexuality and masculinity.

1.1 Masculinities and its many forms:

Masculinity is the combination of experience, performance, attributes, behaviors and socially constructed gender roles associated with men. Since masculinity is not a monolithic experience, there is not only one type or form of masculinity but several types and ways to experience and perform masculinity. Harvey (2005) explains the diversity of masculinity in the following typology.

Hegemonic masculinity and the alpha male:

Harvey (2005) describes hegemonic masculinity as the traditional form of masculinity where men are bound to act assertive, aggressive, physically strong, socio-domestically dominant, oppressive and discriminatory towards women in order to establish the superiority of patriarchy (298). Men who follow hegemonic masculinity are labeled as “Ideal man” or “Macho man” as they establish or easily follow the traditionally masculine patriarchal social standards of manly behaviors and attributes (Morgan 87). Hegemonic masculinity can also be named as alpha-masculinity as the socially identified or self-identified alpha males are hegemonic masculine men too (Brannon 96).

Complicit masculinity and the beta male:

Complicit masculinity is the form of masculinity which recognizes the positive and negative aspects of socially rigid hegemonic masculinity and tries to fit inside the patriarchal society by following the traditional masculine standards while not questioning them (Harvey 297). On one

hand where hegemonic masculine men are alpha men on the other hand these complicit masculine men are beta men following their alphas and their alpha masculine standards. They don't challenge or try to advocate any kind of social change to eradicate the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Clare 31-33). The term beta male, used in this thesis corresponds to this type.

Marginalized masculinity:

Marginalized masculinity refers to men who can achieve the traits of hegemonic masculinity to some extent but lacks to identify as alpha males due to physical disabilities such as being handicapped, crippled or malformed and belongings to oppressed marginalized groups (Harvey 298). These men share the same psychological approach to achieve the top position within the male-hierarchy proposed by patriarchy just like hegemonic alpha men but fails due to some financial, social and physical lacking (Morrell 121-123). They are also labeled as beta males in this study.

Subordinate masculinity and the omega male:

Subordinate masculinity is a form of masculinity which refers to men those who do not fit the hegemonic patriarchal standards of traditional masculinity and alters the traditional view of the socially constructed rigid masculinity (Morrell 126). These men are complete counterpart of alpha men and they are labeled as omega men. Homosexual men and feminine men can be identified as subordinate masculine men who by their ways of being challenge and break the social norms

promoted by hegemonic masculinity. The term omega male used in this thesis refers to this last type.

As the thesis will demonstrate with some variation from culture to culture, society to society, from one historical time period to another, the core assumptions about manhood and standards of traditional manliness have been rigidly patriarchal and almost the same everywhere.

1.2 Variations of Gender:

As we know Gender and sex are two different identities. Sex is allocated with one's assigned biological sex by birth such as male (humans with male genitalia), female (humans with female genitalia) and intersex (the ones who are biologically born with fractions of both male and female genitalia). Where on the other side, gender represents one person's psychological self-identification and inter-hormonal connection with one's assigned sex by birth (Ahmed 5-6).

Cisgender:

Cisgender means a person who completely identifies with his or her assigned biological sex. As example we can showcase the most common scenario of a biological male psychologically identifying himself as a male. Such males are cisgender males and for such females the correct term is cisgender female (Ahmed 5-6).

Transgender:

Transgender refers to a person who doesn't identify with the assigned biological sex. The by-born male who psychologically and inter-hormonally connects and identifies being a female is a transgender woman where if a by-born woman identifies being a male then the correct term is transgender man. The Trans* term works as a umbrella term for several variations of non-binary gender identities those are not cisgender. Now-a-days the trans* label covers all non-binaries such as trans men and trans women those have gone through a gender re-assignment surgery, transvestie

(those who prefer to wear dresses from opposite biological-sex) and others such as genderqueer, bigender, agender, etc. (Ahmed 5-6).

Genderqueer:

Genderqueer refers to a person who doesn't subscribe to conventional gender distinctions or traditional gender-roles but may identify as neither, both or a combination of masculinity and femininity. The another term gender-fluid is similar to genderqueer as there might be an indecisiveness or fluidity quite naturally within. The only difference is that a gender-fluid person's gender identity might keep changing over time to time (Ahmed 5-6).

Bigender:

A person who identifies with both male and female entities within despite having one assigned biological sex is referred as bigender. As an example it can be said that a by-born man who acknowledges both his masculinity and femininity within quite prominently; can identify himself as bigender. A bigender person might not feel neutral like a genderqueer person as the person can relate to both traditional masculine and feminine gender expressions (Ahmed 5-7).

Agender:

Agender means a person who cannot relate or identify to any specific gender or masculinity or femininity at all. An agender person doesn't feel the belonging to any particular gender roles. An

agender person rejects both the traditional masculine and feminine gender identities as the person is unable to relate to any such gender expressions at all.

Gender is not fixed always. Patriarchal societies might only acknowledge the existence of cisgender people only but there are lot more gender identities under the trans* umbrella. Gender expressions varies person to person and there is a vast pool of gender narratives where people relate to genders differently as well (Ahmed 2-3).

1.3 Spectrum of Sexuality:

Human sexuality is not homogenous and heteronormative like many other animal species. There is a spectrum of sexuality that varies widely. Sexuality is not only about male and female having intercourse. Patriarchal societies have confined sexuality under the constitution of marriage which can only be between a man and a woman traditionally. It normalizes the heterosexual way of life and sexual attraction only which itself is against the nature as natural humans are not always heteronormative (Ahmed 1-2).

Sara Ahmed (2006) explains the diversity of spectrum of sexuality in the following typology-

Heterosexuality:

Person who is a heterosexual gets both romantically and physically attracted to another person from the opposite biological-sex. As an example it can be said that a man being sexually attracted to women or a woman being sexually attracted to men.

Homosexuality:

Person who is romantically and physically attracted to other persons of his or her own biological-sex is referred as homosexual. A homosexual person is attracted to same-sex. Homosexual men are attracted towards men while homosexual women are attracted towards women.

Bisexuality:

Person who is bisexual gets romantically and sexually attracted to both the sexes, masculinity and femininity. Pansexuality is a broader term than bisexuality as a pansexual person gets attracted to both the sexes and other non-binary persons those who don't identify with masculinity and

femininity as well. Sexually fluid persons belong to the bisexual umbrella as their sexual orientations might evolve from time to time (Ahmed 1-2).

Asexuality:

An asexual person doesn't necessarily feel any sexual attraction for any gender, sex or gender expressions but the person might feel romantic attraction for any sex. Demisexual and semisexual people belong under the umbrella term of asexuality. Hypersexual persons are complete opposite of asexual sexual orientations as it can be heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual.

Even though we can see bisexuality being the prominent and primitive sexual orientation for many animal species and even within our evolutionary ancestors from the past, we still consider heterosexuality as the standard way of living our life while erasing the existence of other sexual minorities and their sexual orientations and expressions (Ahmed 151-152). This phenomenon has been normalizing throughout thousands of years of heteronormative re-interpretations of ancient epics like the *Iliad* and *The Mahabharata*.

The typologies above are stated with a clear motif to showcase the diversity we have within us be it a man's masculinity or about the variations of gender or the vast spectrums of sexual orientations. Patriarchal societies have been super-imposing the concept of cisgender-heterosexuality by normalizing heteronormativity among us years after years which is not the truth if we analyze the earliest ways of living keeping the glorification of cisgender heterosexual alpha male characters and the representation of other characters from the epics side by side. By analyzing these factors from Netflix's *Troy: Fall of a City* and Star Plus's *Mahabharat* it will only be an attempt to unveil the uncommonly discussed truth.

Chapter 2

Literature Review:

Gender is the culmination of behaviors, languages and practices that exist in a specific socio-cultural understanding of gender. The case is similar for understanding the male and female genders. The hegemonic masculinity and femininity have not become a norm overnight. It has been constructed, standardized and normalized over the years within human societies. Representations played a huge role in authorizing such patriarchal construction as the only way of being a man and woman. The following section discusses some of the ways masculinity and femininity have been understood over time.

Both Clatterbaugh (1990) and Whitehead & Barrett (2001) reinforce that masculinity and male behaviors are not a product of biological predispositions or any kind of genetic coding. goes on to outline how the concept of masculinity always demands strong contrast with femininity (67). A man is first and foremost understood as being someone who is not a woman. From the earliest civilization men have established their identity through behaviors and actions that are opposite to what are commonly considered as feminine. When men display contrary behaviors – gentle, weak, timid, compliant and not sexually aggressive for example – they are labeled as non-masculine or feminine. Connell (1987) also emphasizes, if a society or culture does not establish men and women as polar opposites at-least in terms of behaviors and principles then that society or culture does not have the concept of masculinity in the sense of modern European/American culture (9).

In addition to this binary being a major constitutive element of hegemonic masculinity, Harvey (2005) points out how the understanding of masculinity has been preoccupied with the

questions of power from its inception. In her review of the historiography of masculinity from the period 1650-1800 she shows how power made the division of gender-roles inevitable (296-298). In order to give the leading dominant position with higher political power and socio-domestic superiority to men, societies established patriarchy over the years (Connell 26).

Harvey talks about the modern era (1650-1800) where political act which involves the exercise of power must exclude women in order to establish gender role differences but she also added that this patriarchal practice to suppress women into a socially, domestically and sexually passive roles became a part of politics far before modern era. Harvey doubts that the redefinition of manly assertions such as verbal command, political control, physical violence, sexually dominance associated with men and the redefinition of women as domesticated and sexually passive is a modern establishment or not. She says that the key to this is a patriarchal shift from one-sex to two-sex model of sexual difference which has been implemented over thousands of years. She explains how these transformations in gender bodies, masculinity and femininity were driven by a worldwide shift influenced by the ancient form of patriarchy, which was gradually renamed as “modern secular patriarchy” as the new “replacement” for modern era (297).

Other than these general studies on masculinities, the epics that are the core texts of this thesis have also been studied extensively for their role in either reinforcing or resisting the hegemonic masculinity.

Pattanaik (2014) for example represents the Indian epic, *The Mahabharata* as an early example of gender-bending text when gender fluidity has been glorified. He argues that the Indian epic doesn't reinforce or construct the standards of stereotypical gender-roles or hegemonic masculinity as it glorifies the effeminacy of the character of Krishna in a heroic way despite of him being feminine according to the patriarchal standards. This claim is based on gross

generalization of the representation of Krishna. Far from reimagining the gender lines, Krishna's selective glorification problematizes such simplified reading of Krishna's character in the epic. This claim is not only problematic or debatable but can also be proved wrong as the glorified traits of Krishna within the epic were hegemonic masculine traits rather than the feminine ones. Krishna's feminine attributes including his effeminate physical behaviors were far from glorification, and were in fact -mocked at. The parts where the character of Krishna is celebrated is when he is seen being the alpha male –mastermind, assertive, powerful dictator behind the entire war of Kurukshetra. This study will offer a contrary reading of the other major characters of the epic, thereby challenging Pattanaik's claim for *The Mahabharata* as one of the early evidence of enforcing gender equality within ancient India.

The other core text for this thesis– *The Iliad* has also been studied in a similar light for its representation of masculinity.

Popular critic and writer Thomas Van Nortwick (2008) in his- *Imagining Men- Ideals of Masculinity in Ancient Greek Culture*, explores the ancient Greek models of masculinity within Greek literature in the period from 750-400 B.C.E. He claims that the contemporary ideals of masculinity contradict with the masculinity found in the ancient Greek epic. Giving an example of the character of Achilles who is considered as the epitome of ancient Greek manliness, he points out how the typically “non-masculine” traits like sensitivity and homosexuality among men used to be celebrated in ancient Greece. According to him, hegemonic masculine standards of modern era contradict with the masculine ideals planted by the great Greek epic- *The Iliad*. Such a claim can also be problematic as the close reading conducted by this study will show how the glorified heroic traits of Achilles are not his emotions and homosexuality rather his dominant, violent battle skills. His “non-masculine” traits were shown to be the reason for his downfall instead (176). It

can be argued instead that Nortwick has intentionally dodged the fact how the hegemonic masculine traits of the alpha-male characters have been glorified in *The Iliad*.

BR Chopra's TV series- *Mahabharat* (1988-1990) is considered as the "original" adaptation of the epic by the viewers till today. It contains ninety-four episodes that still airs on Indian TV often which reinforces its already established traditions on TV again and again. This early TV version of The Mahabharata only glorifies the alpha male characters by emphasizing on how rigid their masculinities were in the ancient time leaving the viewers with a cue to follow the traditional masculinity as the superior and standard one. This version of the epic erases the glorification of Shri Krishna's femininity. There is not much clarity about the character of Shikhandi who changes the gender from female to male. This is supposed to be an early example of transgender sex among Indian epics but it is erased in the early TV version of it. The representation of diverse genders has been vaguely erased in BR Chopra's *Mahabharat* which keeps gaining high TRPs (Television Rating Points) whenever its repeatedly re-telecasted (India Forum). TV shows like *Suryaputra Karn* (2015), *Karn Sangini* (2018) and Ekta Kapoor's *Kahaani Hamari Mahabharat Ki* (2008) follows the similar stereotypical representation of hegemonic masculinity and submissive femininity in an even more worse way possible (India Forums).

Along with other movies based on the Trojan war of *The Iliad* such as *Helen of Troy* (2003) and *The Trojan Horse* (1961), the 2004 movie *Troy* excelled in the Box-office more than any film based on the same concept. Brad Pitt playing the legendary character of Achilles created a huge impact on the viewers about their understanding about the character. Popular Hollywood actors

like Orlando Bloom and Eric Bana also played the characters of Paris and Hector chronologically. Hector and Achilles's alpha masculinity has been glorified in such a way as if this is the only "ideal way to act as a man". Paris's character played by Orlando Bloom has been portrayed as a weak, coward, hated beta male while justifying the representation of him in the original epic. The major erasure made by the film was how it projected Achilles as a complete heterosexual male while making his supposed to be homo-romantic male partner Patroclus merely as his cousin. Heteronormativity has been deeply re-established by the movie itself. It gave Brad Pitt's character a so called "macho image" by omitting the not so widely accepted homoromanticism and Achilles's bisexuality in order to earn more money worldwide. The original epic clearly indicates a homo-romantic perhaps homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus which is completely missing in the 2004 movie. In order of the representation of gender and sexual diversity, *Troy* (2004) movie is a disgrace (Hollywood Talkies).

Various TV and film producers have worked on *The Mahabharata* and *The Iliad* while exploring a monolithic perspective regarding gender, sexuality and the construction of hegemonic expressions of them. Therefore, it can be said that TV. Films and media lacks the representation of different types of gender and sexual expressions that always existed, but this study will focus on the representation within the two series- Netflix commissioned BBC One production's *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018) and Star Plus commissioned Swastik production's *Mahabharat* (2013); whether they showcase diversity and non-traditionality or they remain as mere presence, rendered as marginal discourse and only hegemonic-masculine traits are glorified, which help to reinforce the rigid hegemonic masculinity and femininity. The study will focus on the non-traditional gender and sexual expressions keeping the traditional ones juxtaposed.

Chapter 3

Representation of gender and sexual diversities in Star Plus's *Mahabharat*:

The Hindu epic – *The Mahabharata* is an ancient Indian text written by the legendary author Ved Vyasa which is thousands of years old. *The Mahabharata* is based on five generations of Indo-Aryan Kuru-kingdom and the Kurukshetra war between the Kaurava-brothers and Pandava-brothers. Through this text one gets to know about ancient Indian political, social, cultural domestic laws, systems, human behaviors and socio-cultural customs. It describes an ancient Indian society where patriarchy is established as the law and system. It works as a standardized code of gender expressions and sexual behavior. The original epic has portrayed gender and sexual fluidity among the characters of Shikhandini, Brihannala/Arjuna and even Shri Krishna which is either erased or almost absent in the earlier TV-media adaptations of it.

In Star Plus's *Mahabharat* produced by- Swastik Productions we viewers get to see a new perspective of gender and sexuality of the ancient India. The mythological series consists 267 episodes which originally aired from 16th September, 2013 to 16th August, 2014 on Star Plus. Despite the stereotypical expectations from other low-budget Star Plus shows with poor cinematography, screenplay, VFX and script; this show is indeed well made in terms of those parameters. It excels in terms of the representations of characters, their growth, their gender and sexual expressions as well compared to other TV series based on the same epic. It even deviates from the original epic and glorifies non-traditional attributes of gender that is not clearly present in the original epic by Ved Vyasa. It glorifies the gender-change event of Shikhandini which is not very much there in the original text.

Before tracing the construction of gender, masculinity and femininity in the epic one must take into account the two Sanskrit terms- “Purushartha” and “Purushuttam” – upon which the understanding of man at that time depends. Among the Indo-Aryans, the word “Purushartha” set the base of patriarchy and the moral code of manliness and male-like behavior. The Sanskrit word “Purushartha” can be divided into two parts- “Purush” which refers to man and “Artha” which refers to meaning thus the word “Purushartha” refers to the meaning of being a man. This meaning of being a man refers the fixed hegemonic masculine gender roles, dominant macho behaviors and patriarchal moral codes for men. In order to be considered as a man in the ancient Indian society a man must have “Purushartha” which means he must follow the route to ideal masculinity. The term “Purushuttam” is illustrated in another ancient Indian epic- *The Ramayana* which literally refers to the ideal man or the standard male model. This is similar to the concept of alpha male where the hegemonic-masculine male is being considered as an ideal man. *The Mahabharata* includes male characters across the spectrum of masculinity discussed in the earlier chapter. On the one hand there are Bhishma, Karna, Arjuna, Duryodhana, Dronacharya, Yudhishtira, Bhima, Jarasandha, Drupada, Balarama and Parashurama the alpha males as they tend to maintain “Purushartha”, on the other hand the other hand Nakula, Sahadeva, Vichitravirya, Pandu, Sanjaya and Salva are the beta males who submissively agree and believe the hegemonic masculine alpha male standards but do not qualify or fit as alphas. Eklavya and Shakuni represent the omega males who resist hegemonic masculine standards. In the original epic there is indeed a classification of men. This classification is also present in Star Plus’s *Mahabharat* as not much changes in the representation of men. There is a slight change of the representation of the omega male character Eklavya in the series as episode 44 glorifies Eklavya as a hidden hero of the epic. This breaks the chain of male-hierarchy (Alpha-beta-omega).

In order to understand the representation of femininity in the selected TV series; one must focus on the patriarchal term “Sati” woman or pious woman which tells us how women are supposed to be submissive, docile and obey men. The original epic talks about “Panchakanya” or “Panchasati” which glorifies five female characters- Ahalya, Kunti, Sita, Tara and Mandodhari for their obedience to men. It elevates them to five iconic female characters while telling other women to follow them. This term is missing in the 2013’s *Mahabharat* TV series. The Star Plus’s show glorifies Draupadi’s rebellion against her own five husbands and the Kuru-Kingdom. In the promos they put Draupadi as the prime female character of the series unlike the other shows those only highlighted the disrobing of Draupadi. The series goes against the original epic and gives Satyawati’s character a voice of her own for her own marriage. The representation of women in the series was not totally according to the original epic but the writers and producers did change a lot to revamp the characters according to their own understanding of gender and how it should impact on the modern TV viewers and the devotees. On one hand the original epic showcases a patriarchal representation of women but on other hand the series focuses on strong female characters by making them equally strong as men. The producer of Star Plus’s *Mahabharat*, Siddharth Kumar Tewary tried to make this *Mahabharata* relevant for the youth and for today’s women and that is the reason why they re-constructed and revamped the original series by providing stronger version of the female characters like- Draupadi, Gandhari, Amba/ Shikhandi, Satyawati and Subhadra with a feminist perspective. They speak of their heart and stand against patriarchy. They are provided dialogues demanding justice by going against patriarchy and questioning it (India Forums).

A close reading and analysis of *The Mahabharata* and the series *Mahabharat* (2013) reveals how despite the presence of a wide variety of men, the epic prioritizes and glorifies one specific type of masculinity- the alpha masculinity over others, normalizing the hegemonic masculinity.

This is the common theme that has been imposed by the original epic and the series as well. Despite some notable changes the series does the same normalization of hegemonic masculinity. The following section describes how this is done through standardization and endorsement of alpha-male attributes even though the Star Plus show indeed showcased some non-traditional male-attributes.

3.1 Standardization of a monolithic masculinity and femininity:

Both heroes and anti-heroes of Star Plus's *Mahabharat* are molded according to the alpha-masculine standard. While the series displays some contrary drifts, often misread as example of gender fluidity, the following close analysis of some characters will show how the glorification of a man remains strictly adherent to the hegemonic masculine standard. Despite the monolithic representation of masculinity in the series we do get to see non-traditional femininity through the female characters breaking the submissive stereotype present in other adaptations of the epic.

From the heroic characters, Bhishma, the son of goddess Ganga and king Shantanu remains one of the most crucial character. Bhishma's legitimacy is established early in the series by his portrayal as one of the most dominant, aggressive, skilled warrior and as a patriarch (Episode-2). In order to protect his father's kingdom and reign he vows to protect the patriarchal reign in the kingdom – Hastinapur. Even if his vow or his deeds might not be correct for all, Bhishma's character is never questioned by the general citizens (Episode-3). In the Swayamvara episode of *The Mahabharata* he abducts the three princesses of Kashi- Ambika, Ambalika and Amba wrongfully with complete disregard for the ritual of Swayamvara itself where the princesses are supposed to choose their husbands among the suitors. Not only does he enforce his own will over

other competitors and the princesses, but most importantly deprives the princesses of their right to choose their own husbands (Episode-3 and 4). This has graver consequence for the eldest princess Amba, who is in love with the king of Saubala – Salwa. Instead of being derided for this otherwise imprudent decision, his “abduction” is praised by the queen-mother Satyawati and the mass people of Hastinapur when they welcome Bhishma warmly. Satyawati praises Bhishma and his successful captivation of the Kashi princesses by saying “Wah Bhishma!” with a smile of approval (Episode-4). Even the crowd of Hastinapur praises the abduction as Bhishma’s “bravery”. Not only he remains unquestioned, the series further glorifies Bhishma by providing him the title- “Mahamahima” in order to praise his glory and greatness. The Sanskrit word- “Mahamahima” refers to someone who is great and extra-ordinarily righteous in his deeds (Episode-4).

Another central heroic character Karna, a demigod, the son of Surya (Sun deity) and mortal princess- Kunti, is called the tragic hero of *The Mahabharata* by several scholars and critics. His birth has been projected as a tragedy when unmarried princess Kunti of Kuntibhoja applies her boon of attaining children from deities (Episode-14). Karna’s unmarried mother Kunti gets Karna from the God of sun and abandons him due to fear of facing shame from the patriarchal Indian society of that time. Karna, despite his divine ancestry, lived a low-life as the son of a lower caste charioteer Adhiratha and his wife Radha. It is neither Karna’s divine descent nor the unfortunate turn of events in his life that makes him tragic or heroic. It is how he is portrayed as an able man that provides him the heroic position and earns him the status of the king of Anga (Bengal). His aggressive archery gets him noticed by the prince of Hastinapur- Duryodhana and the masses (Episode-52). He wants to “prove” his masculinity through his excellent archery skills to gain the top position within the male-hierarchy. His muscular appearance, assertive behavior and dominating actions earn him the alpha-male status in the epic. During the trial competition episode,

Duryodana discovers that Karna has equal mastery of archery like Arjuna (third Pandava-brother) so he befriends him and gifts him the kingdom of Anga to rule and battle on his side with a king-like status. Karna earns all the respect and praises from the people of Hastinapur for his “Purushartha” (Episode-53).

Karna’s rival Arjuna, the third son of Kunti and Pandu is a central male character of *The Mahabharata*. Arjuna is a demigod, He is fathered by the king of Gods- Indra (God of thunder and rain) who impregnates Kunti for her own magical boon. He is regarded as the central hero by the masses. Arjuna is blessed with divine archery skills, divine weapon such as the Gandiva bow and divine boon of Pashupatastra weapon by Lord Shiva. His mastery over archery makes him the most unique and famous one among the five Pandava-brothers. To maintain his title as the best archer he faces Karna with rivalry and the archery session episode can be an example where Arjuna first encounters Karna with “heroic” aggression (Episode-53).

In addition, Arjuna is also portrayed as an overtly masculine and a sexually attractive, macho man who is a female-favorite. His mastery over archery gains him the immense popularity as the alpha male of the series but also gets him Draupadi- the divine princess of Panchala who Arjuna wins over in a Swayamvara contest where he perfectly aims at the eye of a moving fish. The nature of Arjun’s achievements – slaying demons, battling against Mayasur’s maya (magic), facing his own divine father, Indra, and his winning of Draupadi – only reconfirms the hegemonic masculine attributes. No wonder, Arjuna’s character enjoys the heroic stature and a centrality of focus throughout the series.

The little exception is when we see the character of Arjuna disguising as a feminine dancing transgender woman during the year when the Pandavas are supposed to disguise and hide from the Kauravas so that they don’t gain another thirteen years of exile, we notice that this part of dressing

up like a woman is glorified in the series as “another beautiful form of men” rather than the original epic which mocks Arjuna’s state by providing the name “Brihannala” to the transgender woman form of Arjuna. Brihannala is a Sanskrit name which literally translates to a sexually passive male who has a giant anal hole. “Brihat” means huge and “Nala” means hole and the word Brihannala is metaphorically used to mock that feminine form of Arjuna by himself (Haq). Arjuna is not the hero of the series for this part of dressing up as a female rather he is the central hero because of his alpha male attributes such as his mastery over archery which brings him under every limelight given in the Kurukshetra war of *Mahabharat*.

Among the female characters we get to see the rebelliousness of Amba, princess of Kashi. She refuses to go with Bhishma and rebels against the swayamvara (Episode-3). She has been portrayed strong and intelligent in the series who burns down an entire crop field in order to meet her love of life Salva during her introductory episode. She has a strong dialogue while asking justice from Bhishma which questions the patriarchal constitution of marriage giving it a feminist perspective- “Vivah mein purush bhiksharthi hota! Daan stree ka hota hai!” (Translated meaning: In a marriage the male is supposed to be a beggar and the female is the wealth that he begs!) (Episode-4). Here the writers have bent the conventional meaning of marriage and tried to provide it a matriarchal touch which doesn’t fail. Amba’s character later takes a rebirth as Shikhandini who undergoes a gender change from a female to male in order to take revenge from Bhishma. This episode was glorifying a transgender character unlike other adaptations. When Shikhandini changed her gender, she got equal respect from both her father- Drupad and her sister- Draupadi (Episode-188). Like Amba, the character of Satyawati also takes the decision of her own marriage. Her character is the most revamped one among all others. The creators of the show totally changed her character from the epic as she is seen to ask king Shantanu to marry her rather than her father

which is on the original epic (Episode-1). Satyawati might have acted as the female equivalent of a patriarchal head but she has also created a strong presence of women in the show from the very beginning. Satyawati's character is seen to have a grasp on the mighty Bhishma who follows every single order from her. She doesn't represent traditional femininity here as she proudly flaunts her dominance over Bhishma (Episode-3). Breaking out of the conventional gender role for females, we see queen Draupadi wielding a sword and fighting snakes from Khandavprastha (Episode- 69). Fighting is considered to be a hegemonic male pride but a female character slaying flying-poisonous snakes is a gender-breaking scene in Indian-TV. This scene is absent in the original epic and in the other TV adaptations of the epic. Draupadi is seen doing the same as she fights with Dusshasan who tries to grab her by her hair. They could not change the entire epic but they tried to portray some non-traditional gender aspects in order to deconstruct the idea of gender that has been normalized and standardized by the original epic and its other TV adaptations. Unlike the representation of masculinity which brings no notable changes and does not carry any non-traditional values to its viewers, the show surprisingly represents non-traditional femininity and endorses it to some extent and tries to normalize it among the viewers. The show's high TRPs (Television Rating Points) indicate that how the viewers grasped it very well. The show became such a big hit among the Indian TV viewers for its catchy female protagonists that it gained 4.8 TRP in June, 2014 (India Forums). This hit show has been re-telecasted even since. During the COVID-19 outbreak in April, 2020 its rerun got a prime time slot again on Star Plus gaining its female centric episodes a gigantic 6.0 TRP (BARC India, India Forums).

3.2 Questioning the endorsement of Gender bias and gender binary:

Another way the heroes conform and uphold the hegemonic masculine ideals is indicated by their relationship to the women of the epic which is not the case here in the series. Almost all great men- human or divine – follow and uphold without question the belief in the essential binary between man and woman. The assembly hall episode describes the hostility towards the women of the epic but the series presents it a fresh new perspective. Draupadi is humiliated by disrobing (Dyuta Parva). In several verses of *The Mahabharata* such as 3.13.113 and 5.93.11, Karna insults and humiliates Draupadi- the wife of Pandavas by calling her a “whore.” He validates the patriarchal social system that sanctions polygamy for men, while castigating a woman for the same. While the epic describes Draupadi’s polygamy with his five husbands as a shameful act, on the other hand, one of Draupadi’s husband- Arjuna’s polygamy with his other wives (Ulupi, Chitrangada and Subhadra) remains unquestioned.

In Star Plus’s Mahabharat this event of disrobing Draupadi’s dress has not been glorified but highlighted Draupadi with some strong dialogues questioning masculinity and patriarchy leaving the viewers question their normalized thought about it. In terms of Draupadi’s polygamy the series is silent and it does shame her like the original epic as “Panch-pati wali Vaishya” (Whore with five husbands) through Karna (Episode-154-155). Karna here acts as a representative of all males in the series with oppressive, hegemonic-masculine standards and attitude towards women. Draupadi stands against Karna in this episode of the series while her husbands are silent. There is a background music behind this scene with lyrics- “Pati-dharm, pati-dharm vivastra vivastra, Manav dharm vivastra vivastra” which is literally shaming the husbands for not standing up for their wife’s honor, it is sited as a shameful act for entire mankind but not for Draupadi. The series itself thus helps to re-establish this scene which originally inhere

gender-bias towards women. Going against the conventional story it retells the event by giving Krishna a monologue where the god himself is supporting Draupadi's points rather than just saving her honor with magical cloth. It tries something different by giving Draupadi a vengeful dialogue who talks back and rebels against this oppression of hegemonic standards imposed by men and the constitution of marriage- "Tumne meri vivashta dekhi hai, Abh mai tomhara vidhvansh dekhungi" (You have seen my helplessness and now I will see your destruction) (Episode-157). When Kunti comes to console Draupadi for her dishonor, she tells her that she is no longer her daughter-in-law with the provoking line- "Mai apki putravadhu nehi" (I am no longer your sons' wife) (Episode-158). She even brings out the crucial issue of consent from a woman by shouting out loud- "Kya apne mujhse anumati li thi? Kya maine anumati di thi?" (Have you taken my consent? Have I given you my consent?). When Duryodhan labels her as his slave she refuses it by saying- "Mai dasi nehi kyunki mujhe ye swikarya nehi, manya nehi!" (I am not a slave because I don't accept the slavery!) (Episode-158). She tries to break out from the gender bias in a very non-traditional speech even though the original epic endorses it. The series paradoxically endorses both traditionality and non-traditionality here in a confusing manner for the viewers.

3.3 Antagonists who do not challenge the ideal masculinity and femininity:

The antagonists of the epic equally contribute to the construction of a monolithic masculinity and femininity like the protagonists as well. Karna's ally Duryodhana is a major antagonist of the Hindu mythological series. He is the eldest son among the hundred sons of the blindfolded queen of Hastinapur- Gandhari and the blind king- Dhritarastra. As the eldest one among the hundred Kaurava-brothers, he is the hardest one to battle with. Despite being the antagonist, his masculinity has been praised in the epic time and again. His masculinity is never described in a negative term, rather he is portrayed as an empowering masculine figure in the series (Episode-140). He "proves" his masculine dominance in the battle-ground to be the strongest mace fighter and equal to Bhima (Second Pandava-brother). He possesses skilled martial arts techniques from Dronacharya (Teacher of the Pandavas and Kauravas). He dominates among the other Kaurava brothers in sports and skills with his immense physical power and strength (Episode-250). He becomes the favorite student of Balarama (Brother of Lord Krishna) while taking specialized training on mace fighting (Episode-185). In the preparatory episode of Kurukshetra-war, Balarama describes the muscular body of Duryodhana by comparing his body-flesh with "lightning-bolt" (Udyoga Parva). His masculinity is further glorified when Balarama declares Duryodhana as the "greatest mace fighter of his time". In order to get the throne of Hastinapur, the crown prince Duryodhana takes help from his maternal uncle Shakuni to diminish the Pandavas several times. He attempts to poison and murder Bhima several times, He tries to burn the Pandavas down in Lakshagriha (Episode-97). These cunning planning and plotting puts Duryodhana in the negative light. Despite his utterly negative actions, he is always portrayed as physically powerful and rightfully masculine, even when he is bullying the Pandava brothers in order to establish his superiority over them.

During his visit to Indraprastha (The new kingdom of the Pandavas) he feels insulted by Draupadi's smirk when he gets called- "Andhe ka putra andha!" (blind father's blind son) (Episode-140). It hurts the male-ego of Duryodhana and he craves revenge. Duryodhana invites the Pandava-brothers in a gambling game of dice and tricks them in order to gain victory over Draupadi. He asks his younger brother Dushasana to drag Draupadi and bring her to him, orders him to disrobe her and make her sit on his left thigh whiling tapping them in order to humiliate Draupadi who "dares to humiliate a man". He feels that disrobing Draupadi in front of the council of Hastinapur will be equal to what she said to him in mockery. Patriarchs of Hastinapur see this incident as a "justified punishment" for Draupadi as no one questions this event. This indirectly fuels and glorifies the male ego of Duryodhana and reflects the mental state of the society regarding women and men's normalized dominance over them (Verse-3.13.113) (Episode-156). Even though Duryodhana is the antagonist of the epic, his virility, aggressiveness, oppression over women has been justified and popularized by the epic itself (Udyoga Parva, 1. 49-59) and the series does the same (Episode-157).

Similar to Duryodhana another antagonist Jarasandha is the powerful king of Magadha. He too draws his legitimacy as a powerful antagonist from his political power and unparalleled physical strength. He dominates among other kings and attempts to sacrifice several kings on his way to turn into a vicious king-slayer emperor among the Aryans. Even Lord Krishna, incarnation of Vishnu himself shifts his kingdom to Dwarka for his cruel dominance and malice. He is so unbeatable that Lord Krishna and Bhima attempts trickery in order to kill him (Sabha Parva, Jarasandha-vadha Parva) (Episode-144). Even after his death, Shishupala (King of Chedi) remembers his hegemonic masculine dominance and well-constructed maintenance over his kingdom in the epic during the coronation ceremony of Yudhishtira at Indraprastha (Episode-141).

3.4 Patriarchs who believe in the ideal:

Next comes the patriarchs of the series who reinforce the hegemonic masculine standards as well. The character of Dronacharya is the royal teacher of the Kauravas and Pandavas who is an extremely skilled warrior Brahmin who possesses several divine weapons, martial art skills and mastery over archery from his own teacher Lord Parshurama (An incarnated form of Lord Vishnu). He is also a patriarch in the series who teaches his students the ways to maintain “Purushartha” (Episode-64). In the episode of the Kurukshetra war his unparalleled battle skills, undefeatable strength and physical masculine power are glorified (Episode-216). He is considered as an epitome of patriarchy in the series (Episode-217). He takes birth from a vessel rather than a womb of a woman. He is seen taking huge pride from the fact that no woman contributed in her birth which he uses to prove his male superiority to a further extent.

Another patriarch like Dronacharya is Drupada the king of Panchala. In The Mahabharata we see him giving more importance and affection towards his male child Dhrishtadyumna over his female child Draupadi. He discriminates among his children over their sexes and thinks that his son is the only one who can fulfill his vengeful dream of taking revenge from Dronacharya. We know patriarchy prioritizes male child over females and supports such gender discrimination in the name of male-superiority. When Drupada arranges a yajna (Grand prayer session) to please the gods in order to gain a male child he gets Draupadi as a special gift from the gods. He ignores her and arrogantly demands a male child from the gods and the gods surrender to his intense wish and thus Dhrishtadyumna takes birth out of the fire of yajna as well. His patriarchal rule has been praised by Dronacharya himself making him another glorified alpha patriarch (Episode-83).

After Dronacharya and Drupada comes Balarama who is also a legendary patriarch. He also possesses the dominant power of strict state-maintenance. Balarama is considered as a living

god during that era (Dwapar yuga- third era), a positive character in the series. He is the elder brother of Lord Krishna who possesses immense physical strength. He is the mace-fighting tutor of Duryodhana and supports his side without battling in the Kurukshetra war. Balarama is also considered as a righteous incarnation of Lord Vishnu in the epic whose status is similar to legendary Parshurama (Sixth incarnation of Vishnu and a living God) who is the teacher of warriors like Bhishma, Dronacharya and Karna (Episode-102).

3.5 Students who accept the ideal:

The patriarch teachers are followed by their patriarch students. These characters represent gender and sexuality in a very traditional manner like the patriarchs. Dronacharya's student Yudhishtira's character is the eldest among the Pandava-brothers who is the demigod son of Kunti and Pandu. Yudhishtira's spiritual father is Yamraja- God of the dead who is also known as Dharma (The righteous one). Yudhishtira follows patriarchy as the law of his life which is shown as the right way to live like a man in the series (Episode-100). He is portrayed as a righteous character who always maintains "Purushartha". All his actions are justified and considered correct by the people of Hastinapur. He counts his wife Draupadi as his property and loses her in the game of dice (Episode-153). His action of objectifying Draupadi as his property is well justified in the epic where no one during the event questions his action. He follows hegemonic masculine standards and establishes the patriarchal male-ownership over women. His actions conform to the standard of alpha male and the epic glorifies his character as the "righteous" one.

Like Yudhishtira, his brother Bhima is also a demigod, the second son of Kunti and Pandu. He is described as the most macho male character with the "gigantic strength of ten thousand

elephants.” The series elaborately describes the “manliness” and might of Bhima through several incidents of him slaying the hundred Kaurava-brothers, Jarasandha (King of Magadha) and several demons like Hidimba, Kirmira and Jatasura (Episode 66, 72, 76). This proves the immense glorification of Bhima’s hegemonic masculine, alpha male characteristic in the epic (Shalya Parva, 9. 74-77) (Episode-66).

The continuous glorification of the hegemonic masculine attributes within these characters of *Mahabharat* (2013) proves how the series is standardizing and reinforcing the concept of alpha-masculinity of thousands of years despite the fact that it tried to represent non-traditional femininity with some of its female characters.

3.6 Construction of the beta-male through juxtaposition:

Star Plus’s *Mahabharat* projects some male characters in a lower rank by creating a hierarchy according to hegemonic masculine standards. The hierarchy is constructed primarily in two ways, the first of them being through juxtaposition. Some can be understood through juxtaposition and others by their marginalized attributes.

The character of Vichitravirya juxtaposed with Bhishma can be a great example. Son of Shantanu (King of Hastinapur) and Satyawati (Shantanu’s second wife), he is the younger half-brother of the great warrior Bhishma. In contrast to Bhishma, the assertive, aggressive, dominant and glorified alpha male who fits the hegemonic masculine standards of a patriarch, Vichitravirya is a physically weak prince who is even unable to wield a sword to learn sword fighting from Bhishma. Bhishma tries to teach Vichitravirya the ways of “proper manly behavior” (Purushartha)

in order to prepare him as a patriarchal king but Vichitravirya fails to meet the standards even if he tries to follow them (Episode-3).

The epic portrays his character as someone who is divested of physical prowess and virility which makes him a beta male (Adi Parva, 1. 1-19). He has been sidelined in the narrative as we don't see him contributing much to the story prominently. His character is dead before even mating with his two wives- Ambika and Ambalika. His wives are impregnated by another divine son of Satyawati- Ved Vyasa (Writer of the epic- *Mahabharata*) himself. Ved Vyasa comes here as a sperm donator whose two sons (Dhritarastra and Pandu) from the two queens takes the storyline further. Vichitravirya's beta male attributes are shown to be useless and ignored by the epic when the writer himself interferes to contribute in the continuation of the storyline (Episode-3).

Similar to Vichitravirya, the character development of Salva the king of Saubala is similarly submissive in the series. He is described as a weakling compared to the alpha male Bhishma and he is mocked after his defeat to Bhishma. The gathered kings laugh at him in the first Swayamvara event of Kashi princesses when Bhishma takes him down (Adi Parva, 1. 1-19) (Episode-5).

3.7 Marginalization of the beta-male:

The second technique by which the alpha-males are prioritized in the hierarchy is through the marginalization of the beta-males in the narrative of the series. Descendant of Ashwin Kumara (Hindu God of Medicine and surgery), Nakula and Sahadeva are both demigod twin brothers, sons of Kunti and Pandu. Their divine power lies in medicinal treatment and surgical knowledge which puts them in direct contrast to the aggressive, violent masculinity displayed and cherished in the other three Pandava brothers. Their special power is seen as passive and hence not male enough (Episode-82). They are relegated to the margins of the narrative while the three Pandava brothers with their hegemonic masculine traits occupy the center as active agents who drive the action forward.

Like typical beta males, Nakula and Sahadeva obey their alpha male brother Yudhisthira blindly. They agree to any command of Yudhisthira even if it is wrong. When their wife Draupadi is being disrobed by Dushasana they are silent to obey their elder brother's command. The series sidelines their non-masculine traits as well as them as they are not portrayed as major characters (Episode-151).

Pandu, their father is no different. He is also presented as a weak and unlikely man. His character has been rendered insignificant and is given short time period to rule. In the series he is seen to be a pale and physically weak prince with a negative tone (Adi Parva) (Episode-26).

Next comes Sanjaya (Assistant of king Dhritarastra) who possesses the power of divine vision but uses it during the Kurukshetra war according to the wish of king Dhritarastra. All he does in the series is that he follows Dhritarastra's commands. He acts like a beta male who follows his alpha. He is given a divine power but he uses it on another person's command. He could have

used his power to build up his individual identity but the show develops his character in a passive way with shorter limelight (Episode-147).

According to the hegemonic masculine standards and its alpha-beta classification system these men can be identified as beta males those are less glorified compared to the alpha males in the epic.

3.8 Representation of alternative omega-male attributes and their non-traditionality:

The series has some male characters with alternative lifestyle and ideology and surprisingly it does not suppress them through punishment or bullying unlike Ekta Kapoor's *Kahaani Humari Mahabharat Ki*. These characters challenge the dominant order or male-hierarchy in the series. The character of Eklavya is a glorified one in Star Plus's *Mahabharat*. He is a tribal boy (Nishada) who secretly follows Dronacharya and learns archery from him without his consent. He breaks out of the caste system here. His character is among the very few characters in the epic who don't try to follow the hegemonic masculine standards or "Purushartha" or fit the hyper masculine box. He is seen to have homoerotic or homoromantic bond with other male companions (Episode-44). He finds his own way to learn just for his own curiosity. He doesn't appear as a physically masculine or an unemotional male. His character is an interesting one who breaks rules of Dronacharya and proves himself better than Arjuna in archery without being a masculine icon. However, his talent is suppressed by Dronacharya by tricking him to cut his thumb as a payment of Dronacharya's teachings in the series just like it is in the original epic. Eklavya's character has a lot of potential but the epic does not glorify his non-hegemonic masculinity rather glorifies his sacrifice for his teacher. However, the series showcases him in a non-traditional manner and glorifies him as a hero

(Episode-44). Other TV shows don't give his character much time to develop and make him fade but 2013's *Mahabharat* created a hero out of him. A hero with not so much hegemonic masculine traits. A hero who breaks out of traditional laws of patriarchy. Such a character who does not follow the patriarchal laws, class system according to "Purushartha" can be identified as an omega male and here the series glorifies him which is the only exceptional representation of men in the entire show.

Similarly, we can analyze the character development of Shakuni, king of Gandhara, brother of queen Gandhari and the cunning maternal uncle of the Kaurava-brothers. He is one of the major antagonists of the epic who is described physically weak as a king but extremely scheming under a passive appearance (Adi Parva, 1. 1-19) (Episode-11). He is one of the main villains, he leaves his own kingdom and comes to live in Hastinapur where his beloved sister Gandhari is married to the blind king Dhritarastra. This kind of behavior is not king-like and he is mocked by Bhishma and the people of Hastinapur. Shakuni faces bullying for choosing an alternative lifestyle (Episode-39). He does not follow the patriarchal laws nor "Purushartha" and comes to his sister's kingdom in order to take revenge from the kingdom of Hastinapur. His character is described in a passive, negative light in a non-glorified manner who is neither an alpha male nor a beta male (Adi Parva, 1. 1-19) (Episode-38).

These two characters chose an alternative lifestyle that doesn't follow the patriarchal social construction compared to alpha and beta males which helps us classify them as omega males. The epic doesn't allow them to contribute or encourage a new lifestyle for men as they are seen to be either restricted or bullied by other characters like Dronacharya and Bhishma but the series does treat the character of Eklavya differently. This can be a very short yet strong attempt of normalizing non-hegemonic masculinity. On one hand Eklavya is glorified in the series and on another hand

Shakuni has been shamed and bullied. Two male characters with omega male traits, one a hero and another one a villain. Yet again the series paradoxically creates a confusion on whether it is endorsing non-traditional male traits or not. Here we can clearly find the politics of their representation which stops them to contribute in the construction of the concept of masculinity. By excluding the glorification of their different kinds of abilities and powers and the resultant alternative masculinities the epic solidifies the idea of a monolithic alpha-masculinity among the people of ancient India which later on contributes greatly in the construction of modern-day patriarchy. Unfortunately, with just one glorified non-traditional male character for just few scenes in one episode the series does not do justice to the representation of the diversity of men like it does with its non-traditional female characters. The series doesn't change much among the male characters but it does portray some empowering, strong, non-traditional female characters unlike other TV adaptations of the epic.

Chapter 4

Representation of gender and sexual diversities in Netflix's *Troy- Fall of a City*:

The ancient Greek epic *The Iliad* is attributed to Homer which is based on the mythical Trojan-war. Like the great Indian epic – *The Mahabharata*, *The Iliad* is also thousands of years old text which tells us about ancient Greece. Both epics are from a similar ancient time where the patriarchal, hegemonic masculinity, submissive femininity is being seeded and normalized within society, politics, culture, domestic laws, systems, human behaviors and socio-cultural customs as well. The ancient Greek text immortalizes the hegemonic masculine characters and makes them the ideal heroes and role models for the people of ancient Greece.

Heteronormativity is one of the major difference between the epic and its film adaptations. While on one hand the epic has homoeroticism, homoromanticism and bisexuality within the character of Achilles but on the other hand the movies so far have bluntly “straight-washed” the entire character while imposing serious heteronormativity by it. Film like *Troy* (2004) showcases huge celebrity like Brad Pitt in a complete heterosexual manner where it is not the case in the original epic. Achilles's character has been represented as an epitome of heterosexuality by several money-making Hollywood movies and *Troy* is the most famous one which paves the way. Sexual-diversity erasure is a major problem among Hollywood movies but not much in OTT platform such as Netflix. Netflix's *Troy-Fall of a City* is a mini web-series co-produced by BBC-One with just 8 episodes. It does not have much of gender-diversity but showcases the diversity of sexuality which is prominently missing in the other media adaptations of *Iliad*.

Like Star Plus's *Mahabharat*, Netflix's *Troy- Fall of a City (2018)* also classifies its alpha males and beta males by praising one and ignoring another. Both the Greeks and Trojans have their "hyper" masculine characters who have been venerated repeatedly in the series like- Achilles, Agamemnon and Hector. The identified beta male characters like- Patroclus, Menelaus, Paris and Deiphobus have shown physically weak and their masculinity being criticized and questioned (Episode-7). Unlike the ancient Indians, the Greeks take the hegemonic masculine standards even more seriously as in the series we get to know how the Greeks destroy the disabled and physically weak male children during birth so that they can build a masculine army reflecting the hegemonic masculine phenomenon. Here the cinematography, VFX and screenplay is far better than other adaptations while doing justice to the representations of original characterization.

The alpha-beta dichotomy is more predominantly present in this than *Mahabharat (2013)*. According to the series, the Greeks celebrate patriarchy as a way of "proper life" (Episode-3). From the epic itself it can be traced that the ancient Greece is the place where the concept of patriarchy originates. Like the Indian concept of "Purushartha" they had the same understanding about a man's masculinity which is clearly hegemonic. Similar to "Purushartha" which dictates the meaning of being a man under a hegemonic-masculine construction, the Greeks use the word "Andrismos" (Ἀνδρισμός) in the Greek version of *The Iliad* by Homer which means the same and it works the same among the people of ancient Greece (Murray 26-27).

A close analysis of the series reveals how the alpha-male is considered as an ideal standard for all men, Alpha male attributes have been glorified by the epic through characters in order to establish the same monolithic form of masculinity which standardizes hegemonic alpha-masculinity while on the other side the female characters are merely present here only to mysticize their beauty and jealousy narrated under a patriarchal tone to normalize feminine energy in such a

meticulous light. This series does not have strong female characters going out of their boxes of traditional femininity even though they are goddesses. They have been represented in a way that they fight indirectly just to get validation for the male god- Zeus. The path-breaking female character of the original epic is Athena (Goddess of knowledge and war tactics) but she doesn't get much screen-space neither represented well. Divine female characters like Aphrodite (Goddess of beauty and love) and Hera (Goddess of marriage) are shown fighting with each other in a way that they are just fighting to rise up in front of the male-gaze. Even Helen's character is silently docile and not much rebellious unlike the original epic (Episode-4). Helen is supposed to discover her sexual lust for Paris which leads her to take a decision of eloping with him but here we get to see Paris making the major decision of eloping and persuading Helen like the Hollywood movie- *Troy (2004)*. Hector's wife- Andromache has been pitted against Helen as a cunning character. The female characters are mostly present here only to display the "women against women" theme. The series fails to create strong non-traditional female characters in terms of both the representation of gender and sexuality.

4.1 Ontological difference and superiority:

The claim of superiority of the alpha-male rests on their being different ontologically from the rest. They are clearly portrayed as a better version in the series. The celebrated, greatest warrior of the series- is Achilles who is a demigod, son of Peleus (King of Phthia) and goddess Thetis. Achilles has been portrayed as an epitome of masculinity as the leader of the Myrmidon-soldiers. The series as well as the epic itself separates his ontological being from others by portraying him as a demigod. This demigod status has been given to justify his super-human strength and to represent him as an "ultra-masculine" hero among the Greeks to follow. Achilles fights for the Greeks

showing immense physical strength and dominant power (Episode-6). The way the epic uplifts and praises Achilles's "hyper-masculine" attributes in the glory episode (Day of glory), it idealizes and standardizes hegemonic alpha-masculinity within ancient Greece (Episode-8).

Moreover, his hegemonic masculinity has been sexualized and normalized by presenting his ways of being a man in a positive manner (IX.663-669) (Episode-6). His way of abducting women, dominating over his teenage beta-boy Patroclus have been shown as a praise-worthy reflection of "true" masculine behavior by the text itself and the series does not alter this fact (XVII 411, 655). Both the Greeks and the Trojans praise his hyper masculinity by comparing him as the "lion among the Myrmidons" in the series (Episode-7).

Even the homoerotic or homosexual companionship between Achilles and Patroclus has been used to show Achilles as a primitively dominant man over other men. It is Achilles's male ego which makes him stop fighting when Agamemnon (King of Mycenae, brother of Menelaus) takes away his slave-girl Briseis from him (Episode-5). Achilles fits the codes of "Andrismos" with his extreme physical strength and dominance. We get to see the celebration of hegemonic masculinity in the clash of their male-egos celebrated across the epic by other beta male characters like Patroclus, Menelaus and Paris. Their submission towards alphas make them beta males of the epic. This certain circle of obedience and praise towards hegemonic masculinity in the ancient epic helped to turn alpha masculinity into a normalized tradition within the ancient Grecian world. Quite like Bhishma and Arjuna of *Mahabharat*, the brutality of Achilles has been labelled as the "greatest bravery act ever" by his own Myrmidon-soldiers in the glory episode (Episode-8). The superior masculinity and the ontological difference that is celebrated in this great hero is manifest in his physical- strength, aggressiveness, virility, and an inflated ego – which is no different than how we understand hegemonic masculinity.

4.2 Heroism, accountability and responsibility:

Achilles is the declared hero of the series who slayed the mighty Trojan-prince Hector. Similar to Achilles, Hector is another ideal sample for hegemonic masculine male who fits all the alpha-male standards of being typically aggressive, strong and assertive as a man. Hector is the greatest Trojan prince who slayed thirty-one thousand Greeks according to the series as well as the epic (Episode-6). On the other hand, Hector's character also turns immortal only for his "masculine" battle skills. Compared to his lover-boy brother Paris who paved the war by eloping with Helen like a coward, he is the bravest among the Trojans who fights for his land and family according to the Greeks in the glory episode of the series (Episode-8). He manages to act as a responsible protector of his family and country (Episode-4). He feels protective for his brother Paris. In the episode where Andromache (wife of Hector) tries to dissuade Hector from his decision to enter into a single combat with Achilles, Hector does not listen to his wife and encounters Achilles in order to "fulfill his duty" to protect Paris and Troy (Episode-6). Even though Hector is a loving husband, he chooses responsibility of a man as per the hegemonic standard for ideal male behavior over what could have been prudent, life-saving but less heroic, as suggested by his wife (Episode-6). He establishes a strong sense of patriotism among the Trojans which makes his character the alpha leader among the eyes of Trojan soldiers and in the introductory episode of the series (Episode-1), his character is praised and venerated as the muscular Trojan patriarch (Episode-2). His character sets an ideal standard of a man who must be a physically strong patriarch in order to fit the rules of "Andrismos."

Agamemnon's character is greyer in the series as he sacrifices his own daughter Iphigenia by betraying her and lying to his wife Clytemnestra in the name of victory. Even this brutal negative act is praised as the most positive and celebrated act by the Greek warriors those are

desperate to cross the Aegean-sea by the blessing of goddess Artemis. Iphigenia's murder in the series is the most celebrated mass-murder recruited by her own father Agamemnon even in the epic itself (IX. 145, 287) (Episode-4). The epic glorifies Agamemnon's hegemonic masculinity as he kills hundreds of Trojans by calling it "a day of glory" (Episode-8). Agamemnon's captivation of Cassandra as his sex-slave is viewed as a victorious act post the Trojan-war by the Greek citizen (Episode-8). The series itself prioritizes such alpha male characters as the central leads of the mythological series which is based on the Trojan-war and the abduction of Helen (Queen of Sparta, later on queen of Troy).

"Ultra-muscular" body, patriarchal dominance, assertive leadership and supernatural strength are the common attributes of all these three male characters those are continuously glorified in the series providing them the alpha male status. They may have some contrasting characteristics but the core traits regarding their "manliness" is completely similar. These characters set the base of the understanding of a "standard masculinity" (Andrismos in Greek) in the minds of ancient and modern people. The way the epic portrays the characters of Achilles, Hector and Agamemnon and frames them as immortalized warriors proves how it contributes to the construction of hegemonic alpha-masculinity.

After a close criticism about the glorified alpha-masculine attributes one needs to understand how the beta-male traits have been marginalized by creating a hierarchy in the series.

4.3 Penalizing the beta-male traits:

Troy-Fall of a City is based on the Trojan-war which starts due to the abduction of Helen, queen of Sparta and wife of king Menelaus. In the series we get to know that the Trojan prince Paris falls in love with the married queen and then they elope from Sparta. It is a mutual escaping rather than forceful abduction by the Trojan prince Paris who does persuade her first. In ancient Greece, the abduction of women by man is considered as “manly domination”, while Paris’ elopement makes him a weak man (Episode-4). The Trojans also show lesser respect for Paris than Hector in the same episode he frightenedly brings Helen to Troy. Paris’s character is always resting under the safe shelter provided by Hector. He can easily be identified as the less-glorified beta of his alpha brother Hector (Episode-4).

Paris is portrayed as the lean and thin lover-boy, not so muscular physically like a warrior according to the introductory episode of the series as well as the original epic. When Menelaus, brother of Agamemnon, previous husband of Helen challenges Paris into a single-battle he elopes and runs in order to save his own life. This incidence is seen as a great shameful act by Paris. This is the major proof of how the epic portrays the character of a physically weaker man, Paris by shaming him in the storyline. He is brutally shamed and hated for his cowardice by the Trojans “as the dark death is hated” (III. 454) (Episode-5,6). The series penalizes his beta male attributes by subjecting him to this unanimous shaming by the society according to hegemonic masculine standards.

Menelaus, the king of Sparta faces similar kind of shame when Helen elopes with Paris as this is considered shameful according to patriarchal traditions set by the epic itself (Book-III). He is seen as a man who is “unable to keep his wife to himself” as Helen is supposed to be Menelaus’s “personal property” that he could not defend being a weaker man (Book- III, IV) (Episode-4,5).

The series sets the patriarchal standard where the husband is the guardian, provider and owner of his wife and if he is unable to keep or control the wife then he is labelled as a weak husband and a weaker man which is supposed to be a matter of shame (Episode-5). The construction of this attribute as a beta male trait only strengthened the hegemonic masculinity. We see Menelaus's submission to his brother Agamemnon throughout the epic. Agamemnon is the one who wins over Helen and then gives him to his brother Menelaus to marry with him. Menelaus's request to Agamemnon in order to bring that wife back to him shows his inferiority complex within the series (Episode-5). The way the series builds his character in a passive, submissive way; it puts him in an inferior box. The attributes along with the character of Menelaus has been sidelined by the series.

Similar to Menelaus and Paris we can also identify the character of Patroclus as a beta male companion under the dominance of alpha male- Achilles (Episode-4). Patroclus is shown as a lesser and physically asthenic man than Achilles when he gets slayed by Hector. Patroclus has been shown the more emotionally driven weak man than Achilles. Even though he is the homoerotic or homo-romantic companion of Achilles yet he acts as a submissive beta man in the series. When Achilles stops fighting for Agamemnon for his own male-ego, Patroclus steps forward and disguises as Achilles by wearing his armor and shield to look and feel like Achilles. Here the series proves his "lacking" as an alpha male by providing him the armor-dress of Achilles to feel like an alpha male Achilles to fight. In this part the series cleverly shows a difference between the physical power of Achilles and Patroclus and creates the alpha-beta dichotomy within them (Episode-4).

The Trojan king Priam is also a submissive character. He is emotionally enfeebled and enervated towards his sons, especially Hector and Paris. After Hector is slayed and his body gets

dragged by Achilles, he acts passive towards Achilles to get back his son's dead-body. Priam tearfully begs Achilles to pity him by "kissing" the hands of his son's murderer (Episode-7). This is neither a king-like behavior nor an alpha male attribute. Achilles pities Priam and grants him Hector's corpse. Priam's emotional weakness makes him a beta male and his emotional beta-male attributes are pitied and marginalized in the series.

Both Menelaus and Patroclus obey Agamemnon and Achilles as someone greater than them as men which is proven by their obedience to the alpha male in the story. Similar to them is Deiphobus's character who just works under the commands of his brother Hector just like Paris. His character doesn't grow much in the series as we can see in the introductory episode. Even Helen is seen to get sexually frustrated and attracted to Achilles's hegemonic masculinity after getting married to Paris. She cheats on Paris and goes to meet Achilles. Her character is represented in such a way that it only uplifts the macho image of Achilles and puts down the character of Paris to shame (Episode-6). Helen's disloyalty was not her own choice but she was being sexually persuaded by Achilles who constantly compares his "chivalry" and "masochistic" behavior with Paris's cowardice (Episode-6).

These characters along with the traditional female characters have been overshadowed by the alpha males in the series and this proves how the series itself contributed to the construction of hegemonic alpha masculinity among the minds through its representation of gender. Unlike *Mahabharat*, *Troy-Fall of a City* penalizes the beta male traits to further extent, it only shows the alpha males as the heroes and it does not bring out non-traditional femininity within its female characters. The epic and the series both enforce the ideology and hierarchy of alpha-beta dichotomy which is one of its predominant and original theme as well. However, the series

showcases sexual diversity in a bold yet justified manner which is unique compared to other media adaptations of the epic.

4.4 Representation of the diversity of sexuality:

Like Homer's *Iliad*, Netflix's *Troy-Fall of a City* has maintained the originality in terms of the representation of diverse sexuality unlike its other film adaptations promoting heteronormativity while erasing homosexuality/bisexuality completely. The series does not explore the sexual-diversity or sexual expressions of its female characters as vividly as it does with its male characters. It showcases Helen's character to have some female homoerotic companions but they were present there just to increase the sensuality of Helen's beauty. Their presence does not define Helen's sexuality in the series. The female companions are used just to make Helen appear more erotic to Menelaus and Paris and it is mentioned in her introductory episode as well (Episode-2).

Unlike the traditional representation of female sexuality, the representation of male sexuality in the series is surprisingly non-traditional and non-heteronormative. It doesn't erase Achilles's bisexuality. There is a homosexual intercourse scene between Achilles and Patroclus representing their same-sex romanticism and homoerotic relationship. There is also another bisexual intercourse scene in the same episode between Achilles, Briseis and Patroclus where Achilles is shown getting attracted to both Patroclus's "masculine" aspects and Briseis's "feminine" behaviors. Achilles's character accepts his attraction towards traditional masculinity and femininity but this however makes his sexual-orientation a non-traditional one- a very non-traditional representation by the series. *Troy-Fall of a City* does justice to Achilles's sexuality just like the original text unlike other adaptations.

On one side Star Plus's *Mahabharat* portrays strong female characters breaking out of the box of patriarchal gender-role of women with their non-traditional attitude, dialogues and screen-presence but lacks gender-bending male characters as most of them impose normalized hegemonic male standards while on the other side Netflix's *Troy-Fall of a City* points out ancient, primitive male bisexuality in a vivid way erasing heteronormativity. Both solidify the idea of hegemonic alpha-masculinity like the original texts but we can still trace non-traditional femininity in one and non-traditional male-sexuality in another.

Chapter 5

Conclusion:

The aim of the study was to trace non-traditional gender attributes and sexual behaviors from the two series Star Plus's- *Mahabharat* and Netflix's *Troy-Fall of a City* respectively. A close look at the characterization in both series reveals not only a ubiquitous presence of hegemonic alpha-masculinity as the standard principle for the ideal male, but it also uncovers how the characterization contributes to the construction, normalization and standardization of such patriarchal and hegemonic masculine standards through the way the episodes are presented.

Mahabharat (2013) does that by reconfirming and glorifying the alpha male attributes in all its male characters, be it that of a protagonist, antagonist or others. It also noticeably marginalizes the beta male traits in many male characters by either giving them less scope to develop or not giving them any agency of their own. Only the strong omega male character of Eklavya breaks out of the box but others who appear in the series are either suppressed or silenced in the series, thereby thwarting their potential to contribute to an alternative standard for masculinity. Thus, despite having an array of masculinities on display, for which Star Plus's *Mahabharat* is mistakenly celebrated, the series actually magnifies, prioritizes and pays homage only to those male characters that conform to the hegemonic standard. It might not break the traditional masculine representation but it does successfully bend and breakout from the traditional feminine representation of female characters with- Shikhandini/Amba, Draupadi and Satyawati predominantly. Even though they have lesser screen-space than men, they indeed have impactful

scenes and dialogues with strong VFX helping to churn out their dominant screen-presence in the series.

The other core series under study – *Troy: Fall of a City*, which is crucial for our understanding of Greek ideals of masculinity that too glorifies hegemonic alpha-male attributes. Netflix's Greek male is an extraordinary, heroic male, and a superior being in all sense of the term, hence an ideal. The series establishes this superiority by providing the leading male-roles to alpha-male characters, glorifying the hegemonic masculine standards. It doesn't do any justice to its strong female characters but it does portray non-traditional male sexuality within the character of Achilles and his same-sex homosexual relationship with Patroclus. It clearly does not erase the fact that Achilles is bisexual yet the series project him as a macho male entity. Unlike other adaptations of the epic with heteronormative theme, this series have homoerotic theme in the contrast which is praiseworthy for showing diversity of sexuality within mainstream Greek mythological web-series for the first time.

The standardization works by an obvious technique of textual juxtaposition of the alpha against the beta and the omega males. A close reading of the characters shows how to be considered as a man and earn respect from his peers, the heroic characters need to follow blindly the age old assumptions of what it means to be a man, sacrificing his beta traits, if any. This may often entail going against reason and plain recklessness. The construction of the dominant masculinity is thus dependent on the alpha-beta dichotomy and the politics inherent in their representation. Such contrast is not only suggested, but made quite clear by a unanimous castigation of beta and omega male traits by subjecting them to symbolic ridicule and often punishment.

It can be stated that the continuous glorification of hegemonic-masculinity and alpha-male standards in both the series- contribute to the construction of alpha-beta dichotomy, making way for alpha-masculinity as a standard. Going beyond the mere presence of these alpha-male characters this study unmasks the politics of the representation of hegemonic alpha-masculine attributes and its impact on solidifying the idea of a monolithic alpha-masculinity as the only form of masculinity excluding the alternatives. Apart from this the two series also portray some very crucial gender-bending non-traditional feminine attributes and non-traditional male sexual expressions that is also predominantly noticeable. The glorification of hegemonic-masculinity is always there in both the original epics that the series are based on but they also uniquely churn out some traceable non-traditionality in terms of gender and sexuality and this study successfully projects that non-traditional sparks from the two series.

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