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Niyoga, *Stridharma*, and the Regulation of Women's Agency in the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract
This paper investigates the Mahabharata's influence on women's lives through two institutions: stridharma (the ideal and expected behaviour of a good wife) and niyoga (the levirate-like institution of a wife giving birth to a son of another man to continue her lineage). On first glance, the two seem to be in opposition, for niyoga demands of a chaste wife exactly what stridharma's concept of fidelity to one husband would seem to proscribe. The paper advances the claim that this tension is only apparent and that the epic's resolution of this tension (its deeper logic) is the way it governs women's agency. Niyoga is not presented as an exercise of the freedom of women's bodies, but as an additional service to the husband and his lineage. The body of the woman is regulated to ensure that the line is continued, her chastity is redefined as the obligation to serve the husband's desire to procreate a son instead of being faithful to him. Stridharma and niyoga, read together, therefore constitute a single regulatory unit, which recognizes women's agency just to conscript it: to harness reproductive and moral potential towards the continuity of lineage and varṇa while denying women the agency of choice. Drawing on the works of Uma Chakravarti, Arti Dhand, Stephanie W. Jamison, Julia Leslie and Wendy Doniger's this article supports this reading through the stories of Ambika, Ambalika, Kunti, Madri, Madhavi, Amba, Renuka, Sakuntala and Gandhari, Parshrami, who was a shudra woman and became the mother of Vidura. It ends with a look at the implications of the regulatory logic of these institutions for the interpretation of gender and justice in the epic.

Keywords**: **niyoga; stridharma; pativrata; women's agency; Mahabharata; Brahmanical patriarchy; lineage

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I. Introduction

The most amazing aspect of the Mahabharata's depiction of women is that it is those who follow the rules of wifehood that suffer more than those who don't. It is these women who are most devoted to being good wives who are doomed to the worst of fates. Take, for example, Gandhari who voluntarily blinds herself so as to endure the same affliction as her husband. She loses all hundred of her sons. Another is Renuka, who is so chaste that her husband beheads her for a moment's indulgence in passion. Another is Madhavi, who, handed over by her father and given to kings to procreate, ends up abandoning humanity.

The system consists of two institutions, mainly. The first is *stridharma* itself, which refers to the duties that women have as their gender. The epic clearly states that women should revere their husbands, serve them, consider them as gods and obey them in any condition. The second is *niyoga*, which is the practice of the wife giving birth to the husband's children through another man when the husband is unable to father an heir through death, sickness, or other means. These two institutions seem to contradict each other as far as their meanings are concerned because *stridharma* dictates total loyalty to the husband sexually, while *niyoga* implies that the chaste wife should come together with another man. The epic is a record of the contradiction and a solution to it, which is achieved by some actions that tell a lot about the culture.

The main argument is that:

Stridharma and *niyoga* do not conflict with each other, but rather are different aspects of the same mechanism that regulates the exercise of female agency. This mechanism does not attempt to deny that women are agents (they appear everywhere in the epic, doing things, making decisions, influencing the flow of events) but it is the ends of their agency that it regulates. It is legitimate female agency to act in ways that serve the interests of her husband and her lineage, and it is not only recognized but celebrated and, often, prescribed; it is restricted, constrained, or punished to act on her own account, according to her own preferences or ideas about living a good life. The most simple case of this process is the practice of *niyoga*, which uses the most potent form of female agency, the female reproductive system, for the husband's use alone and which reads any sign of doubt as a sign of devotion.

II. Research Questions

The central claim may be presented as a series of research questions. The main research question is then: How do *stridharma* and *niyoga* work together to regulate women's agency in the Mahabharata, and how does the apparent tension between them suggest a restriction on the appropriate use of women's agency? To this are added four more subsidiary research questions: What does the epic propose as the ideal of *stridharma*, and on what basis does it determine the moral value of a woman? What is the role and rationale of *niyoga* and what is the role of *niyoga* in the paradigm of the faithful wife? How does the Mahabharata reconcile the two conflicting principles and what light does the method employed throw on the basic ideology of the gender system? Why is it that the most suffering women are the most conformist and how is the distribution of the suffering among the *varṇas*? The answer to these questions reveals that *stridharma* and *niyoga* are part of one regulating mechanism which recruits women's agency into the service of their husbands and lineage at the cost of all agency of women for themselves. The arguments of this paper are presented as follows. The methodology will be detailed in Section 2. Section 3 will reconstitute the ideal of *stridharma* as the devotion to one's husband, by way of analyzing the relevant literature in terms of its normative tradition and its modern interpreters. Section 4 will explain *niyoga*, its aims, rules and place in the Vedic and *dharmasastra* literature. The main problem discussed in Section 5 is the conflict or continuation of *stridharma* in *niyoga* practices, the latter of which is dominant. The thesis of this essay will be developed in Section 6, which will discuss the governance of agency in terms of conscripted and foreclosed agency. In Section 7, we will discuss the suffering of the obedient women, and in Section 8, the double suffering of women who are not in the *varṇa* social order. Section 9 will look at the contrary flows; i.e., at rebellious women and their limitations.

III. Approach and Method

This project is a work of political and ethical philosophy, and therefore the methodology is guided by this. There are three key aspects that drive this research: first, the source itself and how it is dealt with; second, the interpretive approach taken towards the source; and third, the utilization of comparative secondary literature.

The text under investigation consists of the critical version of the Mahabharata, published by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and available in an English translation by Bibek Debroy, which is based on the critical edition of the text, as well as maintains the original terminology, including such concepts as "*stridharma*," "*pativratā*," "*niyoga*," and "*varna*" (rather than their approximate versions in English) (Debroy, 2015). This is a key point methodologically speaking, especially when researching the subject of gender, since the regional versions of the Mahabharata sometimes tend to tone down negative depictions of women. The story of Draupadi in the assembly hall makes for an interesting case in point since in most popular accounts she is saved by the miracle of the sudden appearance of cloth provided to her through Krishna's divine intervention while in the critical edition there is no prayer or miracle but only the humiliation scene in all its starkness along with the complete failure on the part of the men gathered in the assembly hall. Translations being to some degrees acts of interpretation, the interpretation in question focuses on the meaning of the crucial Sanskrit terms and does not take any one translation as definitive. This implies that the relevant stories, including *niyoga* of Ambika and Ambalika, Pandu's persuasaion of Kunti, Amba's sufferings, Renuka's sufferings, Madhavi's sufferings and others, are read in the context of the story and not as proof-texts.

The reading approach is based on the careful consideration of categories within the text itself and analysis of the normative structure of these categories. The study is not an attempt in dating the institutions of *stridharma* and *niyoga* or tracing back their pre-textual history, but rather it is an enquiry that is inclined towards figuring out the way in which they have been represented and justified in the epic and in what this reveals about the regulation of female agency. Thus, there are two levels of analysis involved in the reading process. The first level of the study is to reconstruct the account of the concepts in question in the epic; that is, the definition of *stridharma*, the explanation of the institution of *niyoga*, and the discussion of the relationship between them in the context of the epic itself. That is, the analysis here is not about the logic imposed on these narratives, but about the logic used in them. The analysis on the second level picks up the logic reconstructed in the previous step to gain more insights into the assumptions of the institutions it is based on, the interest it serves, and the need it puts on women. In this regard, the analytic distinction between conscripted and foreclosed agency developed in Section 6 may be useful to discern the pattern that emerges when all the narratives of suffering women are considered together. The difference is not intended to be prescriptive, but descriptive. The reading is not exhaustive of the meaning of these institutions, but rather an interpretation that is disciplined by the text. It is held accountable to the evidence of the narratives, and is subject to revision in the face of cases it has not yet considered.

The present study is comparative and dialogical in nature in terms of secondary literature. It builds on the historical and anthropological work on the role of the wife in the ritual of the Vedic period (Jamison) and the later codification of the wife's duty (Leslie), the psychoanalytical work on the internalisation of the *pativrata* ideology (Kakar), and most importantly on the feminist work on the relation between gender and caste (Chakravarti). It does not dismiss or reject the readings of the epic gender politics which foreground moments of

recognition and resistance, and those which foreground the instrumental use of women, but sees both as capturing different aspects of a structure that is at once regulatory and internally contested. The organising concern with the regulation of agency is selected to enable these aspects to be linked; the ability of the epic to both enable and dis-empower women's agency is not in conflict with one another, and the moments of recognition and resistance are mediated by the larger body of the regulation.

IV. The Ideal of *Stridharma*: Wife as Devotee

The Mahabharata paints a picture of an ideal wife in a very consistent and well developed manner. As Stephanie Jamison has demonstrated, since the Vedic period, the wife has been absolutely vital to the male householder's ability to execute sacrifice. Instead of being an autonomous religious agent, woman has played the role of a co-operator; that is, she is essential to perform religious rites successfully, but is still subordinate to the man (Jamison, 1996). The epic continues and develops this theme to create a complete ideology of devotion on the part of a woman to her husband. This is the picture of a woman who is bound to her husband by a vow, and this devotion is the main model of female virtue (Dhand, 2008).

This ideal content is very demanding and strict. The moral universe of the wife is to be centred on her husband. He has to be her sole object of reverence because he is her confidant who protects her from suffering and becomes her refuge at the time of crisis. He is akin to a deity for her, and no other god can be more important than him. Even her austerity, her merit, her hope of heaven are bound to her marital duty; indeed, stories in the Mahabharata indicate that a woman does not have to do austerities, or fast or independently observe ritual, because her service to her husband is enough for her to earn the merit that men gain through the observance of ritual labour (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). The most important work showing this is Julia Leslie's. She worked on *Stridharmapadhhati* which is the most systematic digest of women's duty written in the eighteenth century. The logic of the good of wife being realised only through her husband was already present in the epic, and it was this that hardened into a comprehensive code that controlled the behaviour of wife's every aspect (Leslie, 1989). Another important study that illustrates the depth at which this norm functions is Sudhir Kakar's psychoanalytical examination of the ideal of the pativrata. According to him, this internalisation of the pativrata ideal acts as the formation of a distinctive "ideology of the superego" in the Hindu woman that involves a conscience structured around the imperative of devotion (Kakar, 1989).

The most extreme version of this principle is that a wife should obey her husband even if he commands her to do something that is improper, unjust, or evil. The moral imperative of doing so is only greater because of her poverty, her ill health, or his cruelty. Clearly, this ideological statement is evident here: the agency of the wife lies not in herself, nor in her ability to act independently. It is actually rather defined as the outcome of the satisfaction of husband's desire and his approval of the wife's behaviour. The Mahabharata contains many examples of good women, as do the other norms. For instance, when a family of *brahmanas* came across the demands of the man-eating *rakshasa*, the husband was willing to sacrifice himself for his family, but his wife insisted that she would not be able to live without her husband, since he sacrificed his life for the sake of the family (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). Another example illustrates how the Sage Markandeya instructs Yudhishthira in the real meaning of wife devotion. The story goes that an old *brahmana* asked for alms from a woman, and as he waited for her to give them to him, she preferred to attend to his husband, who returned home at the same time. The *brahmana* was furious when he was informed of his plans, and asked her where her duty to him was. But the woman calmly explained to him that she was bound by the *dharma* of wifely submission, and that she had to obey her husband who was the highest god to her. It is significant that Draupadi says this to Satyabhama so that she can show her that devotion and total self-giving were the keys to her power over her five husbands.

Another such example that comes out in the most vivid light is Bhiṣhma's story of the faithful pigeon in the *Shanti Parva* (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). A female pigeon is eulogized for her fidelity to her husband, and the male pigeon gives his life for the fowler who took refuge under his tree, and receives paradise as a reward; the female pigeon follows her husband to the fire, and dies behind him, and receives paradise as well. Again, the point is clear: the wife who is faithful to her husband, even to the death, can save herself through him.

V. Niyoga: Lineage, Rule, and Background

This concept of being devoted exclusively is very different from the practice called *niyoga*. The word is derived from a number of meanings such as "appointing" and "enjoining", and *niyoga* itself is the act of appointing a man who has been appointed to beget an offspring for another. Most often the widow or wife of a man who died childless or was infertile himself has to undergo this practice. The function of *niyoga* is clearly understood, and its necessity reiterates several times throughout the epic: *niyoga* preserves the lineage. It is part of a man's dharma that he must ensure continuity in the lineage and produce an offspring capable of doing the required rituals. If a person is unable to perform this *dharma* himself, then *niyoga* is used to perform it for the continuation of the lineage.

The epic stories describe two features of *niyoga* practice that must be present to make the argument. First, *niyoga* involves certain rules which subdue it to the hierarchy already established. It should happen dispassionately and solely for the purpose of reproduction without enjoyment of sexual intercourse and the rules include the following: the man whose participation is sought should come from the *varna* that is at least equal to the one to which the husband belongs; the union should follow certain rules distinguishing it from the general sexual intercourse (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). The latter point becomes especially clear in connection with the rules regarding the man's varna because it shows that *niyoga* is not some way of undermining the social order, but rather a means for its preservation since the practice ensures the continuation of lineage within varna limits, and that the child who is born out of it should be able to take over his father's social position. The other aspect of *niyoga* practice is that the stories never depict it as a woman's initiative, but always as a commandment or favour of the husband.

Niyoga is the very foundation of the Kuru lineage as well; the epic is not hesitant to point out this fact. When Vichitravirya, the son of Shantanu and Satyavati, died without any children, there was a problem of succession. Styavati comes up with a plan that on account of being Vichitravirya's half-brother, Bhishma should succeed the throne (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). However, Bhishma did not want to be the king due to his promise to his father. In such condition, Satyavati asks Bhishma that he should practice *niyoga* to father children on his dead brother's widows, namely Ambika and Ambalika. This proposal, however, is rejected by Bhishma as he had also vowed to never beget a child in his whole life. He gave her another answer to Satyavati and she asked for help from her other son Yyasa. Before marriage, Vyasa was born to her from a great sage Parashara. As a result of the coupling of Vyasa, and Ambika and Ambalika, Dhritarashtra and Pandu were born, and hence the entire story of the epic could be made possible. This is because the dynastic line that fought the war of Kurukshetra would have not even come into existence if *niyoga* practice had not been practised. The principle is the same when it comes to the birth of the *Pandava* brothers. Due to the curse that he received while pursuing a female deer, the dying Pandu cannot father his sons and, instead, urges Kunti to use her boon to conceive with divine aid. Later, Madri does the same when she is told by Kunti.

The practice has a long history, and much of the literature has been concerned with the practice in its broader historical context, namely the history of law and ritual in India. Jamison finds precursors of the practice of *niyoga* in the Vedic period and the rituals surrounding the wife's role in procreation and the continuation of the lineage (Jamison, 1996). The literature on *Dharmashastra* is not entirely clear on the custom: Manu describes the circumstances in which it is acceptable, but also says that it is a degraded practice that should be avoided by those who seek to be good (Olivelle, 2005). This attitude in the normative literature is important in itself because it shows how hard it was for this cultural practice to fit into the ideal of the chaste, totally committed wife. This is why this practice seems to be hedged, qualified, and even at times repudiated.

It is important to look into the contextual details and the conditions in which the practice of *niyoga* was performed as it indicates what the ritual was meant to preserve. First, the chosen man would be supposed to copulate without lust, anointed and restrained, considering it a sacred duty rather than a pleasurable act; copulation would be immediately stopped after conception; finally, the offspring of such a union was considered a legitimate descendant of the chosen husband who perpetuates his line, not that of its biological father. All these details separate the practice from adultery and make it subservient to the line: lack of desire separates it from adultery, limitation of the union to conception turns it into a mere means, and the belonging of the offspring to the chosen husband secures the line. Lastly, the condition under which the ritual is not to be performed with a member of a lower *varna* guarantees the purity of the line as well. All these conditions suggested that it was not a loosening of norms but a close system for the reproduction of the patrilineal *varna* order in the conditions of failure.

The asymmetry implicit in the institution is also noteworthy. The heroes of the epic engage in polygyny as a normal part of their life, and do not experience the same stress as a man who has a barren wife when he marries again. On the other hand, if a woman joins any other man other than her husband, it is done only under the auspices of *niyoga*, with the husband's or guardian's consent, and always with the purpose of producing his son. The difference is used to emphasize the functioning of the system: when the management of male sexuality is to advance the sexual interests and offspring of the individual male, the control of female sexuality is only to serve the interests of the husband's lineage. It also shows that *niyoga* is a gendered institution and its existence highlights the importance of the proper regulation of female sexual productivity. In the matter of fidelity and this custom, which we shall discuss next, it is very different from the Dharmasastra.

VI. Niyoga: Disruptive or Compatible with Stridharma?

The question that is suggested in the epic and more clearly by Pandu when he convinces his unwilling wife to accept the *niyoga* of other men is whether it is a violation of *stridharma*. The answer to the dilemma that Pandu's proposal presents is obvious in the epic: It doesn't. How this solution is achieved is the key to its meaning.

The first objection Pandu makes is clearly stated in the language of *dharma* (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). Kunti responds to Pandu's proposal by stating that the ultimate role of a woman is to become a true wife, to be

completely faithful to her husband, no matter what happens, and recounts the story of a woman who had sexual relations with her dead husband's corpse, and whose son was born from an ascetic power. The real *dharma* of a wife is to follow the example of such a wife who was loyal to her husband and did not look for a substitute. In reply, Pandu cites several examples of wives who became pregnant and had sons by other men at the behest of their husbands, himself included, because of the need of his conception with Vyasa, and concludes that to do so out of compliance to one's husband's wishes is the fulfilment of *dharma* and not a violation. Kunti is convinced in the end. The lesson to be drawn from this is that the apparent opposition between fidelity and *niyoga* is overcome by the movement of the object of the wifie's fidelity: she is faithful not to her husband's body or to sexual exclusivity per se, but to his will. In the event that the husband wishes to have a son, but is incapable of producing one, and the wife gives birth through the use of another in response to his wishes, she is not betraying her devotion but performing it. If, then, chastity means service, then the wife's sex life is not to be governed by a rule of exclusivity, but by a rule of service, that is, the rule that it should serve the wishes of the husband, and if these wishes include sexual relations with another man, then fidelity to the husband would require it.

This reconciliation is accomplished by a change in definition that shows more than is often realized. Chastity is redefined as obedience to the husband, and it is shown that *stridharma* was never really about the wife's body as such, but rather about the wife's body being entirely the husband's, and his alone, and that he decides how it is used. In this way, whether she follows her husband into the fire like a pigeon follows its mate, or consents to copulate with another at the behest of her husband, the wife has in both cases devoted herself completely and absolutely, allowing her husband to determine her life and the use of her body in its entirety. *Niyoga* is not an interruption of *stridharma*, but an extension of *stridharma* into the reproductive sphere, and it is clear that there is no act that devotion can't possibly demand of a wife.

The cost of this act, paid by the wives themselves, is reflected clearly even as the practice is endorsed. Ambika is horrified by the sight of Vyasa's terrifying form and closes her eyes during their coupling, and her son Dhritarashtra is born blind; Ambalika is also frightened by the sight of Vyasa, and gives birth to a pale son, Pandu. The story tells us that the circumstances of these children are due to the reactions of their mothers to the act performed upon them: the implication being that they were wrong not to react to the act composedly. This not only shows how much these women found *niyoga* to be a terrible experience, but also how much they condemned them for not doing it willingly.

VII. Control of Agency: Conscription and Foreclosure

The following proposition can be inferred from the above analysis. The women within the Mahabharata do exert their agency but is controlled in way to achieve a specific end. Two such types of control can be easily distinguished: conscription and foreclosure. When agencies are conscripted, it means that these agencies are acknowledged as being used for the husband and his patriline. *Niyoga* is a prime example of conscription: the female sexual potency, an exemplary agency, is conscripted for the sake of patrilineal continuity. But conscription has a far broader meaning than this. All of these are acts of agency, all are valued to the extent that they serve the interests of the husband, the husband's wife manages the household, the husband's wife gains the husband's goodwill, the husband's wife suffers hardship, the husband's wife shares in, or goes ahead of, her husband in death. The explanation of Draupadi to Satyabhama about how she controls her husbands is interesting. She elaborates on a clever cult of wifely devotion that includes: the assumption of the husbands' dispositions, the service of their wives and of their mother, the administration of the palace and its treasury, and attendance on thousands of dependents, which enables her to hold the affection and attention of her husbands. This is definitely agency, even power; but agency in the only interests of the conjugal bond, and the woman herself is content with her dignity and pleasure in this idealization of wifely serviceability. She is very clever, but it is a conscript's.

Agency is foreclosed when it is turned inwards, or is self-directed. This implies that women are prevented from choosing based on their own desires, or to pursue a conception of the good life based on their own needs and visions, or assert a self that is defined outside of the context of their relationships with men. The most impressive negative example of foreclosure is the interrogation of Draupadi with Yudhishthira and other elders in the gambling hall (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). Even after losing himself in the bet, Yudhishthira staked Draupadi. She poses an important question before the hall about the legitimacy of a person who has already forfeited his own freedom to wage his wife. This question is morally and legally precise, and its subtlety can be inferred from the fact that even the elders in the hall were not able to answer her. One can argue that the probable reason behind not answering the questions of Draupadi can be that the elders were dependent on Duryodhana in one way or the other. But the narrative appears to be that there was no answer: a wife is so completely a part of her husband that an independent conception of self that can be given agency cannot be formulated, within the discourse of the epic. The agency exercised by Draupadi on her own, not on the behalf of her husbands, is not acknowledged, but rather baffled. She is eventually saved not by a divine intervention of Krishna (in the critical edition of the Mahabharata) but because of an unexplainable instance where her robe is shown to never end despite all the efforts by

Dushasana, and through the last call of Dhritarashtra that put an end to the proceedings. The event clarifies the previous statement that a self-directed agency, when it appears, is well managed.

This is one of the ways to understand an aspect of the epic that seems paradoxical and contradictory: its apparent celebration and suppression of women's agency. This paradox, however, is not one of confusion, but of a principle that is consistently and clearly expressed throughout the epic: women's agency exercised outwards, towards her husband and the lineage, is celebrated; agency directed inwards, towards the self, is distrusted. *Niyoga* and *stridharma* are institutional mechanisms that embody this principle in the most crucial context in a patrilineal order: the domain of sexuality and reproduction where the necessity of women's agency being conscripted for purposes of lineage and *varna* is greatest, and where its foreclosure is thus most stringently upheld. Two characteristics of this logic of regulation need to be highlighted as the epic is by no means simply arguing for a simple denial of agency to women. First, in this logic, women have to be agentive; they cannot be passive instruments, for they would not be able to run a household, keep their husbands in favor, choose to immolate themselves on the pyre of their dead husbands, or perform *niyoga* out of a conscious sense of duty.

The epic requires women to act. It thus fosters in them the qualities and abilities necessary for good agency: diligence, competence, control, loyalty. It withholding women's independent agency (not agency in general). Kunti herself, who is highly praised for her determination to undertake the task of having sons for Pandu's lineage, must first refuse the task out of her own sense of wifely duty before she can put her agency to its appointed task. Second, this logic is not enforced through prohibition, but rather through the distribution of reward and punishment. That is, it is not imposed on all female agency, but on female agency that is socially denigrated, socially non-being, or assigned to the women who dare to think independently (who exercise agency toward the self), as her just desert. On the other hand, those who participate willingly in patrilinear service with the honorific label *pativrata*, are rewarded. It is less a system of force than a moral economy that it imposes, and it is this economy, with all its costs for those who subscribe to it most thoroughly, that is the subject of the next section.

VIII. The Wages of Conformity: Suffering as Requirement

When the apparatus takes women's agency for the lineage, it takes a heavy toll from women for that appropriation. This is the paradigm with which the paper began, and it is the one that demands the highest price from the women who most closely follow the norms most completely. This is evident from a study of the great stories of *stridharma*.

In Madhavi's story, her father Yayati gives her away to Galva (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). The student Galva owed a debt to his teacher, but he could not do it and was stressed out about how to do it to keep his word and make his teacher's wish come true. Yayati knew about the capability of her daughter by virtue of a boon that gives her new virginity after each child, so he lends his daughter to Galva for help. Taking Madhavi with her, Galva then uses her to accumulate the required possessions from the kings. Madhavi is the mother of the three kings, and the teacher himself. She is used for the transections and returned to her father who proposes a *svayamvara* for her, but she decides to become an ascetic in the forest. This story is the culmination of the machine's domination of a woman who is nothing more than a machine for reproduction and is handed back to men through her magical chastity. The only form of the real agency that she exerts is the withdraw from the world that used her.

Amba, like her sisters, had been captured in battle by Bhishma, but she had already vowed herself to Shalva (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). Intriguingly, she was caught between the claims of the men and ultimately got rejected from the both sides. Bhishma gave her back to Shalva, knowing that she already loved him, but Shalva refused her because she has been "won" and is "polluted" by having been the possession of another. She could not find her husband of choice or the warrior who had her, she even attempted to live an ascetic life, but was returned to her father by other ascetic men, who said that a woman is dependent on her father, husband or son forever. When Amba didn't find any place for herself in the world, she ultimately immolates herself to become Bhishma's instrument of death in her next life. Amba's suffering is entirely due to the ideology of feminine chastity as she is rendered valueless and unmarriageable just because she was in the possession of Bhishma for a short period and thus was considered to have violated the chastity doctrine.

Renuka's case is even more drastic. She was the chaste wife of the sage Jamadagni possessing all the qualities of a *pativrata* women. She had a fleeting impulse to desire while she was watching a king play with his concubines (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). She did not act her on desire and prevented her thoughts from being corrupted by at once running back to home. When her husband found out about her sin, it was a very disturbing event. He ordered his sons to kill her, one by one. His youngest son, Rama (Parshurama), could do such a terrible deed of cutting his mother's head off. His father was pleased because of his son's absolute devotion to him and gave his son a boon that would restore her mother. A perfect wife, Renuka had been condemned to death and killed by her son for a moment of desire that she had suppressed. The story is an absolutist one of *stridharma*, and even a spontaneous flutter in the inside is a capital crime.

Shakuntala is also one of the most chaste and loyal behaviour in the Mahabharata but she has to suffer. She is married by consent and when she goes to her husband's court to claim the position that was promised to their son, she is disowned by her husband Dushyanta (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). Dushyanta believes that she was a liar who brought disrepute to his honour and does not trust her, but a voice from the heavens declares her purity. He says he remembered her all along, but pretended not to remember her to make sure that her public reintroduction would be clean. Chilling in its implication, Shakuntala's humiliation is the price that must be paid to create the illusion for the court that the queen, like the ideal wife, is immaculate; her social standing depends on something external to herself, namely divine attestations to her virtue.

Gandhari 's suffering is entirely the product of the fulfillment of her *stridharma*: she chooses to blindfold herself permanently when she learns her husband has lost his vision, so as not to be the only ones seeing (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). Although this is an instance of agency, it is one completely dictated by her ideal of the wifely devotion, and as a result of this very ideal and self-sacrifice, she is stripped of her sons (all hundred) and of everything else during the subsequent war. Her act of *stridharma* is the root cause of her suffering.

Individually and as a group, the aforementioned tales make abundantly clear what the epic's internal moralising does not say, yet cannot avoid: under *stridharma*, women do not obtain protection from suffering through the practice of it, but on the contrary, they suffer most when they follow its dictates most closely, for *stridharma* calls for suffering as the marker of female virtue. It is the truly dutiful women who suffer the most. The standard for feminine chastity is high, and the slightest violation (whether internal or external, with another man's body) can lead to complete disaster. The narratives, which venerate the practice, record such fundamental injustice.

IX. Marginality and Compounded Suffering

The yoke of this regime is unevenly worn. The women who are at the margins of the *varna* order suffer the intensified effects of the *varna* system in a double burden of suffering, and the epic is good at making this clear.

The strongest illustration of this is the *shudra* woman who was sent to Vyasa instead of her mistress (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). Ambika, who does not want to face Vyasa again, orders her servant to be dressed in her own ornaments and sends her in place of the *shudra* woman, who has no interest in the continuity of Shantanu's line, nor in his lineage, nor in his affair, but must obey Ambika's command. She carries the son who will be the most faithful guide of *dharma* in the epic, Vidura, but she is otherwise ignored and her service is finished and forgotten. The text notes a telling detail about her: while the high-born Ambika and Ambalik meet Vyasa with their eyes closed and their faces white with fear, the *shudra* woman meets him composed and unafraid; a posture the text mentions without comment, but which speaks to a life spent navigating profound forms of suffering, one which has rendered women of her station hardened or immune. Her situation is a very extreme case of reproductive agency, a subjugation so extreme that it cannot be explained by dynastic interest that might be attributed to the high-born women, for the *shudra* woman is an object used by one woman against another, each a pawn in a larger game.

This is the dynamic that Uma Chakravarti theorises as Brahmanical patriarchy (Chakravarti, 2003). Chakravarti claims that the control of women's sexuality is linked to the caste system, and that the sanctity of the patriline and hence the integrity of *varna* relies on the regulation of women and the control of women's reproduction, which are not two distinct issues. This necessarily implies that women who exist at the nexus of low caste and female gender bear double subjection and the *shudra* mother of Vidura illustrates this precisely. The similar logic also explains the narrative positioning of Hidimba (a *rakshasa*) who though being a wife of Bhima and mother of Ghatotkacha, will never hold a position of authority remotely comparable to Draupadi's, her origins forever restricting her position. This important feature of the epic cannot be explained by any consideration of *stridharma* or *niyoga* which only explains queens and princesses; the control over women's behaviour also means the control over *varna*, and this control is enhanced as women move down the social hierarchy.

X. Counter-Currents and Their Limits

But it would be a mistake to present the epic as a unified whole, because there are also women of strong, independent character who challenge the norms of womanhood, women who live beyond marriage, women who represent individual desire and will. To ignore their presence would be dishonest, but we also need to examine the conditions in which they can live and move freely in the epic.

One can see women who resist or subvert the norms from within, such as Draupadi, who is the epitome in this regard, who not only shows the utmost devotion to her husbands, but is also very intelligent, quick-witted, and articulate, and who questions the assembly and manages her household with intelligence and skill, which is beyond mere obedience, but still within the limits of *stridharma*. Then there are those women who are completely outside of married life altogether, ascetics and renunciates who devote themselves to learning or austerity, rather than to marital duty: Disha, the ancient learned widow, who meets the sage Ashtavakra, lives alone in the

Himalayas, it is said, as learned as any Brahmanical sage in the Vedas, free from the compulsions of married life, and speaks openly of her desires without reprimand (*The Mahabharata,* 2015). She is even likened to goddess Lakshmi. The debate between Sulabha, an unmarried ascetic, and King Janaka, which is part of the *Shanti Parva*, is a philosophical justification for women to challenge their confinement to domesticity, and is based on a description of the impermanence and futility of the body and social status (Vanita, 2003). The un-married child bearing and mobility of the *apsaras*, celestial women, is standard, and they offer another model for the independent woman.

These women's existence and the epic's portrayal of them are undeniable. Clearly, the Mahabharata envisioned women of knowledge, desire and command, and thus gave them some respect. But the circumstances in which these women are represented and empowered are very particular and set boundaries on their freedom. All these women are in exile, beyond the bounds of the regular social order: in the forest, the monastery, heaven, or on the path to renunciation. The freedom of each independent woman is an exception of a woman who has left or never lived in the world of domesticity that defines the lives of so many other female characters in the Mahabharata. Disha's independence is given in a setting outside of human society, in a remote quasi-mythical place, and is presented as a lesson to a male sage; Sulabha's intellectual victory does not lead to a material change in social conditions, and the celestial nature of the apsaras allows for their atypical form of agency. The epic is willing to explore its most radical ideas about gender, as Dhand and Doniger respectively point out, but it does not allow them to seep in or transform the normal world of domestic society (Dhand, 2008; Doniger, 2009). The independent woman is admitted only at the boundary and is a point of inspiration but not a paradigm for reimagining and restructuring household life.

Lastly, there is a final way in which the epic tries to mitigate the risk of independent female actions, even when they do occur in the domestic sphere: when a female character acts out of the norm, it is usually explained as being required by circumstances of a previous life or by divine command, so that an exceptional act does not create a precedent that can be followed by others. The polyandry practiced by Draupadi exemplifies this practice; despite the claims of various family members, the conventional *stridharma*, prohibiting marriage of a woman to more than one man, does not appear applicable here, because of a variety of stories told about her marriage to five husbands that include tales of boon from lord Siva and of Indras reborn as the Pandavas, tied to Draupadi through predestination (*The Mahabharata,* 2015).

This way of recoding is used to allow for exceptions and to prevent generalizable precedents: the actions of a specific woman are divinely commanded or are a result of her past life, so that her conduct is an exception that must be respected but not imitated by ordinary women. Women of exemplary independence are allowed to exist only in carefully monitored ways, for the women who are allowed to defy norms of propriety and good conduct are always set outside the realm of women who participate in the ordinary, householder society. There are counter-currents, but they are limited by boundaries and strictures that keep them separate from the mainstream society.

Instructively, even the strongest female agency in the epic works for, and not against, the lineage and its honour. Sally Sutherland's comparison of St and Draupadi shows that the Sanskrit epics do give women a variety of assertive and even aggressive behaviours, but most of the time they are encouraged when the woman acts to defend her husband's honour, or to seek justice for her family, and they are most uneasy when her agency is acting on her own will against the norm of her role (Sutherland, 1989). The famous wrath of Draupadi at her humiliation is made even more potent by the fact that it is a demand that her husbands and the assembly fulfill their duty to her, an act of agency that makes the patriarchal order stand to itself, rather than to overthrow it. In their essays on women in the Mahabharata collected by Brodbeck and Black, a number of authors demonstrate how, despite a variety of voices and stances among the figures who populate the epic's many women, the narrative keeps the women in a constant relation to genealogy and dynasty, the claims of which the story line keeps visible (Brodbeck & Black, 2007). All of these scholarly accounts corroborate the current interpretation that the epic does not suppress nor promote female agency, but rather systematically promotes it when it serves the interests of the lineage, and attempts to restrict it when it appears in an autonomous manner. Despite the fact that the two are juxtaposed, it is still one's orientation to the lineage that defines the nature of the counter-agency.

XI. Conclusion: Regulation, Agency, and the Question of Justice

The argument has been made in this paper that *stridharma* and *niyoga*; which on the surface seem to be antithetical, actually work together to compose one apparatus of agency regulation, the logic of which is to harness female agency to the interests of the husband and the lineage, while blocking self-oriented agency. *Niyoga*, then, does not violate the structure of *stridharma* but extends it by re-defining wifely fidelity not as fidelity to her person, but as fidelity to her husband's will-thus requiring her to be united with another man for the purposes of marital fidelity. The same logic that valorizes a wife's management of the household and her willingness to die for her husband also forecloses that inward-directed agency by which women might seek to act in terms of their own desire or lay claim to an authority of their own, and the same logic that harnesses these kinds of outward-

oriented agency simultaneously forecloses that inward-directed agency. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that it is often the most compliant women that the epic visits with suffering, because this is an unfolding of logic of women's welfare being tied to something beyond their own control, which exacts their suffering as the cost of virtue. And the burden of this apparatus rests most heavily on women at the edge of the *varṇa* order, for whom, as Chakravarti points out, the oppressions of gender and caste are indistinguishable (Chakravarti, 1993).

In conclusion to this study, two comments on what these findings mean for the study of gender and justice in the epic may be made. The first is a caution: that one ought not to read the Mahabharata either as tacit support for women's oppression or as a subtle program of their liberation; the text is neither. It is one that maintains a strict code of wifely duty, which it celebrates, but which it keeps on the fringes and in the lives of certain individuals, the materials for a critique of this regime. To read it correctly is to read it critically, neither endorsing nor criticizing the narrative, but holding both in tension.

The second is a construct: that in at least its margins and within the capacity of its philosophers, it admits-and even proposes-that there are counter-currents within the tradition to any fixed structure of gender and the natural order that it represents; the argument for women's independent, learned status that some characters make, for example, is evidence that within the literary world of the Mahabharata, at least, one could at least conceive of questioning the naturalness of the gender order. That critique does not save the women who live within it; there is no evidence that the women who suffer under *stridharma* are saved by the appearance of others within the text who do not. That criticism, however, is part of what is offered in the tradition, and as such, it is important to any reading of gender and justice in the epic; what the epic says about women is a story of a highly regulated and demanding apparatus, and of the awareness (however marginal) of the creator of the epic that the arrangement of that apparatus is unjust.

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