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Abstract

The paper examines Ambā's Speech to Bhīṣma in terms of the duality of the central elements that are mentioned: the husband/wife participants, the father/ daughter reasons, and the moral/social components of dharma. It argues that, by switching the emphasis from the *Udyoga Parvan* to the *Ādi Parvan*, a contribution can be made in viewing Ambā "the wife" as a predecessor of Ambā "the female ascetic." Within a philological framework, methods from Argumentation Theory, such as lexical, rhetorical and logical analysis, serve to further comprehend the speech. Three main conclusions are drawn: the wife's participation in the svayaṃvara is more relevant than that of the husband, the daughter's reasons rely more on rational pondering than those of the father, and the social component of dharma prevails through the preservation of the wedded wife's duty.

Keywords: Ambā; Bhīṣma; *Mahābhārata*; Argumentation Theory.

Introduction

Female characters tend to play key roles in the *Mahābhārata* (Kalyanov 1977-1978, McGrath 2009). Can Ambā, even after her reincarnation as Śikhaṇḍin(ī), be considered as one of those *pativratās* (Shah 2012)? Unlike her sisters Ambikā and Ambālikā, Ambā never fulfills the *rākṣasa vivāha* (marriage by abduction) with Vicitravīrya and, therefore, never endures the *niyoga* (marriage by levirate) with Vyāsa. Nonetheless, she remains devoted to Śālva. By switching the emphasis from the *Udyoga Parvan* to the *Ādi Parvan*, a contribution can be made in viewing Ambā "the wife" as the predecessor of Ambā "the female ascetic."

The analysis of Ambā's speech follows some of the methods of Argumentation Theory (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958): a lexical review of the terms that encompass cultural values, a rhetorical examination of the figures of speech that serve an argumentative function, and a logical reformulation of arguments into syllogistic structures. Nyāya and Alaṅkāraśāstra compliment the modern approach.

Ambā's Story

Ambā's story, in correlation to her role, can be divided into three sections: the wife (1.94-100), the female ascetic (5.170-197), and the warrior (6.108-119). In them, respectively, she fails to marry, she plots her revenge, and she executes her plan.

The failure of Ambā's marriage must be traced back to Bhīṣma, and the problems in keeping the Bhārata lineage. Bhīṣma was, indeed, a truly "awesome" family member: having sworn not to have any progeny so that his father Śantanu could marry Satyavatī, having enthroned his brother Citrāṅgada, and having served as regent for his brother Vicitravīrya, he appeared at the bridegroom choice (1.96.3d, *svayaṃvara*) held by the king of Kāśis for his three daughters: Ambā, Ambikā, and Ambālikā. There, Bhīṣma took them by force (1.96.9d, *balena*), as is prescribed for a rākṣasa vivāha, even though he intended them to be someone else's wives. At this point, the sisters' fates diverge: Ambā, through the speech in question, convinced Bhīṣma to let her return to her husband to be, Śālva, the king of Saubha; Ambikā and Ambālikā were married to Vicitravīrya, with whom they never bore any children.

Thinking about the succession, Satyavatī suggested a niyoga – a type of marriage, according to Dhand, that is accepted in two circumstances: "If a woman's husband proves infertile, then she may resort to another man approved by his family to father children on her. Alternatively, if a husband dies before impregnating his wife, then she may take the same recourse"(Dhand 2004: 39). The niyoga, she argues, as an unrighteous but necessary practice, belongs within the *āpaddharma* (law of distress). Given Bhīṣma's vow of chastity, Vyāsa had to step in. From this point on, the story is well known: from Ambikā, Vyāsa fathered the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra; and from Ambālikā, the pale Pāṇḍu. Thus, while Ambikā and Ambālikā fulfill their role through motherhood, Ambā ("the Mother") is the only one who doesn't give birth. Both her goals as a wife and as a mother are cut short by Bhīṣma's meddling.

Ambā's wandering as a female ascetic is set off by Śālva's rejection. Ambā was cast aside by Śālva, because he considered her another man's woman (5.172.4c, *anyapūrvā*). Ambā took it upon herself to get back at Bhīṣma for ruining her marriage and, consequently, her life. As she herself said, having been deprived of the world of a husband (5.188.4c, *patiloka*), she had no reason to continue living as a woman. For her austerities, she obtained from Śiva the boon of

reincarnating as a man to destroy Bhīṣma. Having vowed to his death (5.188.18a, *uktvā bhīṣmavadhāyeti*), she, an ironically reversed *satī* (faithful wife), climbed onto the pyre.

Born a girl who would then turn into a boy, Ambā reincarnated as Śikhaṇḍinī. After exchanging her genitalia with a *yakṣa*, she became Śikhaṇḍin ("the bearer of a tuft"), a man who used to be a woman (5.193.62c, *strīpūrvaka*) – that is, someone whom Bhīṣma had vowed not to fight. In her study of this portion of the story, Doniger (1999: 284) analyzes Ambā's tendency to split in two, while maintaining, as she has also pointed out elsewhere, her negative character:

> Ambā's need to take revenge, however, transforms her into the familiar witch of fury (or goddess) who haunts and destroys the man who has sexually assaulted her; she becomes, successively, three forms of the mare goddess. First, she withdraws (like Arundhatī in similar circumstances) into ascetism, designed to destroy a man; she becomes a Yoginī, a dangerous, phallic woman. Second, she is cursed so that she endures an intermediary period of ambivalence, half woman and half "crooked" (perverse) river, lacking in fluids and teeming with toothy crocodiles – the essence of the destructive mother. This aspect of her character is heightened by its contrast with the goddess who inflicts the curse upon her – the milky Ganges, who saver the life of her son, the essential act of the good mother. Third, and finally, Ambā enters her incarnation of seesaw sexuality as Śikhaṇḍin; but even here her previous demonic qualities dog her, for Śikhaṇḍin is said to be the incarnation of a flesh-eating demon, a Rākṣasa (Doniger 1980: 307).

Ambā's destructive nature is already implied in her association with Rudra, one of whose epithets is *tryambaka* ("the one with three mothers"). These three could very well be Ambā, Ambikā, and Ambālikā, three maternal figures mentioned in Vedic fertility rituals. Nonetheless, as stressed by Hiltebeitel the fact that the name *kuṭumbinī* ("female householder") exists as a variant alongside Śikhaṇḍin is, at least, "paradoxical, contrasting the destructive with the auspicious" (Adluri and Bagchee 2011: 29, n. 96).

In the end, the warrior Śikhaṇḍin, in the forefront of the Pāṇḍava army, plays a key role in Bhīṣma's defeat by Arjuna. The third and last portion of the story, as a *Ringkomposition*, places Ambā, once again, alongside Bhīṣma. If, by means of her speech, she had already overcome him, now, through an actual defeat in the battlefield, her mission has been accomplished. Although, as Custodi has noted, it is but a partial accomplishment: "Furthermore, I would add, Ambā's

vow to become a man in order to kill Bhīṣma was in a sense nullified from its inception, since Bhīṣma had the boon of being able to choose the moment of his own death – she, therefore, could only ever really accomplish what Bhīṣma would be willing to allow anyway" (Custodi 2007: 218).

Ambā's Speech

> *mayā saubhapatiḥ pūrvaṃ manasābhivṛtaḥ patiḥ |*
> *tena cāsmi vṛtā pūrvam eṣa kāmaś ca me pituḥ ||* MBh 1.96.48 ||

> *mayā varayitavyo 'bhūc chālvas tasmin svayaṃvare |*
> *etad vijñāya dharmajña tatas tvaṃ dharmam ācara ||* MBh 1.96.49 ||

Van Buitenen's translation: In my heart I had chosen King Śālva of Saubha to be my husband, and he had chosen me; and it was also my father's wish. I was to have elected him at the bridegroom choice. You know the Law: now that you know this you must do as the Law dictates. (van Buitenen 1973: 230).

Author's translation: Through my opinion, I have already chosen the King of Saubha as my husband, and he has already chosen me. Also, this was my father's wish. Śālva was the one that I should have chosen in this bridegroom choice. Having understood this, you who know the Law, therefore, practice the Law.

The Husband/Wife Participants

In terms of the argumentation, Ambā's point of view is that, through a svayaṃvara, she is already married to Śālva. Both the verbal and the nominal forms in the first *śloka* (distich) point to this type of marriage. On the one hand, the verbal adjectives, *abhivṛtaḥ* and *vṛtā*, can be traced back to the root *vṛ₂* ("to choose"), the same one that is found in the noun *svayaṃvara*. As documented in Monier-Williams (2008: 70, 1007), in the MBh, *abhi-vṛ* is "to select" and *vṛ* is "to choose in marriage." Therefore, not only did Ambā select Śālva, but he chose her as well. The morphemic repetition in *abhivṛtaḥ* and *vṛtā* is a case of *ubhayāvṛtti*, a figure of speech defined by Gerow as that "in which the same word is repeated in the same sense" (1971: 128).

On the other hand, the noun *patiḥ*, proceeding from the root *pat₁* (to rule), designates, according to Monier-Williams (2008: 582) "a lord" but also "a husband." In the *tatpuruṣa* (determinative compound) *saubhapati* (king of Saubha), it has the former and wider sense, whereas, uncompounded at the end of the first

hemistich, it has the latter and narrower one. In this case, the morphemic repetition constitutes a *padāvṛtti*, a figure of speech that Gerow defines as one "in which the same word is repeated each time in a different sense" (1971: 129). Thus, if interpreted as a kind of *śleṣa* (pun), the etymology might reinforce Ambā's first opinion supporting her point of view: he is her husband and, implicitly, she is his wife.

The adverbial form *pūrvaṃ* (already) compliments the cited participles and nouns. Closing the first pāda in both hemistiches, it emphasizes the parallelism. Moreover, it stresses the temporal aspect of the statement: she has *already* selected him, and he has *already* chosen her. Once she became Śālva's wife, through the rite of svayaṃvara, she cannot be Vicitravīrya's wife through the rākṣasa vivāha. By focusing on the first type of marriage, she avoids having to voice her opinion regarding the second one. She heard Bhīṣma's speech during the abduction, and she knows where he stands: a rākṣasa vivāha is not only valid, but even preferable.

> The wise declare that girls may be given to men of virtue who have been invited. Or they will be decked with ornaments; or a dowry is proffered according to wealth. Others may marry off their daughters for a pair of cows. Others again give them for a negotiated price, while others still force their leave by force. Others lie with a girl that is taken off guard. And other girls find for themselves. Now know that this present marriage is the eight that the sages recall – the bridegroom choice, which the barons [*rājanyāḥ*] praise and observe. But the students of the Law hold that the bride is the best [*jyāyasīṃ*] who is carried off by force. So, princes, I am ready to carry these maidens off by force! Now strive with all your might to defeat me or be defeated: here I stand, princes, resolved on battle!" (Van Buitenen 1973: 228; translation of MBh 1.96.8–12).

Here, Bhīṣma alludes, respectively, to 1) the *brāhma vivāha* (marriage of Brahmā), 2) the *daiva vivāha* (marriage of the gods), 3) the *prajāpatya vivāha* (marriage of Prajāpati), 4) the *arṣa vivāha* (marriage of the seers), 5) the *asura vivāha* (marriage of the demons), 6) the rākṣasa vivāha, 7) the *paiśāca vivāha* (marriage of the flesh-eating demons), and 8) the svayaṃvara. Of these eight types of marriage, Bhīṣma only comments on two: the rākṣasa vivāha, which he deems the best one, and the svayaṃvara, which he, as a baron, acknowledges. Ambā's choices, both of rite and husband, might be perceived by Bhīṣma as second to best, but they are still valid, and, most importantly, they have already taken place.

In syllogistic form, all women who get married become wives; Ambā got married; therefore, Ambā became a wife. Thus, Ambā has chosen to be a wife.

The Father/Daughter Reasons

Ambā's second opinion to support her point of view is that, for the svayaṃvara, she had her father's consent. Therefore, the legitimacy of the procedure rests in Ambā's own *manas* (opinion), as well as in the *kāma* (wish) of the King of the Kāśis. In a form of coordinate argumentation, that is, one in which two or more arguments lead to the same conclusion, Ambā is now a wife *because* she has chosen her husband, and, also, *because* her father had approved for the choice to happen in the first place.

Kāma, according to Monier-Williams's (2008: 271-273) entry, refers to a "wish." Thus, the king of Kāśis' reason for supporting the marriage is more general, inasmuch he wished for her to get married, but he didn't wish upon a specific husband, as well as more emotional, considering the very nature of wishing.

Contrarily, for *manas*, that key concept of various philosophical traditions, Monier-Williams (2008: 783-784) documents the sense of "mind (in its widest sense as applied to all the mental powers)," as well as that of "opinion." In Argumentation Theory, opinions support points of view. In Ambā's case, the use of *manas* suggests a more rational process, including the pondering of options, the decision-making, and the taking of a position regarding the matter. Moreover, Ambā's reason has the advantage of its specificity: if she only needed to get married, the rākṣasa vivāha would suffice; however, if she needed to marry the husband she had chosen, only the svayaṃvara would be a viable option.

The second śloka, also in parallelism, starts with the same pronominal form as the first one. Likewise, its first hemistich returns to the etymological śleṣa around the root *vṛ₂* (to choose). On the one hand, the gerundive *varayitavyas* (the one that should be chosen) is formed from the causative *varayati*, which, according to Monier-Williams (2008: 1007), in the MBh, means "to choose as." On the other hand, the noun *svayaṃvara* provides an explicit reference to the type of marriage. Such morphemic repetition of word and sense, once again, constitutes an example of *ubhayāvṛtti*.

The Moral/Social Components of Dharma

In the speech, Ambā's *nigamana* (conclusion) is that Bhīṣma should acknowledge her point of view, that is, he should recognize her previous marriage and set her free, which is exactly what happens. The syllogistic form is obvious in the use of the adverb *tatas* (therefore) to introduce the request. The choice of the imperative *ācara* (practice), rather than a politer construction, must be highlighted, because

it suggests that both interlocutors share a common ground, mainly, their knowledge of dharma.

The second hemistich of the final śloka emphasizes the rational aspect of Bhīṣma's current situation, by comparing it with Ambā's previous one: before, she had to choose between one suitor and another; now, he must choose between taking her and leaving her. The gerund, *vijñāya* (having understood), derives from the same root as the vocative, *dharmajña* (you who know the Law). As attested in Monier-Williams (2008: 425), *jñā₁* is "to know." So, if Bhīṣma, as he surely does, knows *dharma*, and he, from this perspective, understands Ambā's situation, he will agree with her. Here, the morphemic repetition of the word in a different sense ("to understand" and "to know") represents another case of *padāvṛtti*.

Ambā's request is indirect: she doesn't ask Bhīṣma to let her go to her husband, but to do the right thing, which, as a thoroughly proven righteous person, he most certainly would do. The only problem is that, even though Ambā's *strī*-dharma (duty of a woman) obliges her to return to her husband, in the same way, Bhīṣma's *kṣatra*-dharma (duty of the warrior) forces him to take her with him. Just as Ambā, through her speech, defined herself as a wife in relation to the King of Saubha, and as a daughter in relation to the King of Kāśis, she continues to define herself as a woman in relation to Bhīṣma, which might be the reason why, even after the sex exchange, he continues to see her as belonging to the same gender.

Ambā's devotion to Śālva is what saves her. In this case, the social component of dharma surpasses its moral component. It can very well be argued that Bhīṣma, having Ambikā and Ambālikā, can, without any significant loss, let Ambā return to Śālva. Nevertheless, being able to do so is not the same thing as actually doing it. It is only after he listens to her view on dharma, which, expressly, has to do with the duty of the wife, that he sets her free. Ambikā and Ambālikā just were at a marriage ceremony, whereas Ambā not only became a wife during the ceremony, buy also proved herself a devoted one through the speech. Hence, Ambā, before a warrior or a female ascetic, is a *pativratā* (devoted wife).

Conclusion

From each of the dualities proposed, a conclusion is drawn. (1) From the point of view of the wife, the choice aspect of the svayaṃvara, even though mutual, depends mostly on her. (2) The justification of such choice rests, from a masculine

perspective, in emotional aspects, but, from a feminine perspective, in rational pondering. (3) According to the interpretation of dharma, the social duty of the wedded wife outweighs the moral duty of the warrior. In sum, Ambā identifies herself as a devoted wife and, paradoxically, it is precisely this devotion that drives her to renounce her female condition.

Acknowledgements

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