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## **Testing Alain Testart's Hypothesis on Female Martiality through the analysis of the Ambā-Śikhaṇḍinī-Śikhaṇḍin Episode in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata***

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### **Abstract**

According to French anthropologist Testart (2014), women have been almost universally excluded from martial practices involving bloodshed due to an unconscious law consisting in avoiding blood accumulation. This study will be an opportunity to test Testart's hypothesis using a literary example from ancient India reflecting the ideology of Brahmanical society: that of Ambā in sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, who was reincarnated as a woman under the name of Śikhaṇḍinī, then cross-dressed and finally transformed into a man under the name of Śikhaṇḍin and who fought Bhīṣma, the man she wishes to take revenge on. While at first glance this story seems to validate Testart's model — since Ambā cannot fight as a woman — we will see that a thorough analysis of this episode will allow us to highlight certain martial aspects of the ambiguously gendered character Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin, but also to go further than Alain Testart by uncovering another potential reason for the exclusion of women from the martial domain, that is, the analogy between fighting and sexual intercourse.

Keywords : *Mahābhārata*, Ambā, Śikhaṇḍin, female martiality, Testart, anthropology, sexuality

### **Introduction**

Anthropological studies offer broad theoretical models based on the analysis of human societies, enabling structural principles to be identified. Some models may be based on second-hand data compiled by a researcher who cannot, of course, be an expert in all cultural areas or all periods. It therefore seems necessary to test this type of theory using first hand data that can validate, invalidate, or qualify the theoretical model. The purpose of this study is to test Alain Testart's theory on female martiality, or rather the near-exclusion of women from the martial domain, which according to him would be caused by an unconscious law consisting of an avoidance of blood accumulation (for example, menstrual blood and blood shed during a fight). This theory will be tested by examining data from a literary example reflecting the ideology of brahmanical society: the story of Ambā, who must become man to be able to fight the man she wants to take revenge on, as narrated in the famous Indian epic, the *Mahābhārata* of Vyāsa (northern Sanskrit version).

First, we will present Alain Testart's hypothesis as formulated in his book *L'amazone et la cuisinière* (in English: *The Amazon and the Cook*), published in 2014. Second, we will recall the main points of the story of Ambā in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*. Finally, with this epic episode firmly in mind, we will reread it from the perspective of Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin's supposed martial nature. A detailed reading of extracts<sup>1</sup> presented in Sanskrit and English translation (mostly by Buitenen and Cherniak) will allow us to base our argument on a philological, and in particular lexical, study.

## 1. Alain Testart's theory in *L'amazone et la cuisinière*

An anthropologist known for his studies on hunter-gatherer societies, Alain Testart, in a posthumously published work (*L'Amazone et la cuisinière, anthropologie de la division sexuelle du travail*, 2014), puts forward an original theory about the almost universal exclusion of women from certain tasks in the fields of war, hunting, fishing, metallurgy, and also the priesthood. Noticing that naturalistic and rationalist explanations (women being less mobile due to domestic responsibilities involving children, differences in physical strength), biological-symbolic explanations (women giving life cannot give death, pure-impure dichotomy), or social explanations (subordination of women) were not sufficient to account for all the phenomena observed, he sought to demonstrate that the sexual division of work was essentially based on a cultural belief concerning the symbolism of blood and supported by a physiological observation: menstrual blood disrupts and affects the interior of women's bodies. This observation gives rise to a series of prohibitions: women cannot cause blood to spurt because their bodies are affected by such spurting; women cannot cut bodies because their bodies are affected by such cutting; women cannot suddenly disrupt bodies internally because their bodies are subject to such disruption. These beliefs, which take the form of prohibitions, would appear to be underpinned by a law of avoidance of accumulation (p. 28), which led Alain Testart to formulate his explanatory hypothesis as follows: 'Women have been excluded from tasks that are too reminiscent of the secret and disturbing wound they carry within them' (p. 133)<sup>2</sup>.

To support his hypothesis, Alain Testart provides numerous examples from all cultural areas and different periods, in fields where a division of tasks is observed (war, hunting, agriculture, etc.) but also concerning the distribution of techniques used. Convincing examples include the use of certain hunting techniques employed by women, namely the use of smoke or blunt instruments, techniques that do not involve cutting or piercing a body. Regarding the war that interests us most here, he notes that it is almost exclusively conducted by men, with a few exceptions (the Red Army in Russia, the Iranian and Israeli armies). Women may be involved in warfare, but in tasks that do not involve bloodshed. He cites examples such as camp followers, canteen workers, laundresses, and prostitutes. He also notes that the few female combatants in human history had to hide their sexual identity or had a very special status, such as Joan of Arc, who was a virgin and affected by amenorrhea (absent periods). Testart also cites

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<sup>1</sup> We base our work on the text of the BORI critical edition.

<sup>2</sup> 'La femme a été écartée des tâches qui évoquaient trop la blessure secrète et inquiétante qu'elle porte en elle'.

the mythological example of the chaste Diana the Huntress (p. 36). The question of the ‘purity’ of chastity seems essential to us, and we will return to it later.

Reading this anthropological work gave us the impetus to read in detail the episode of Ambā, a woman who became a man to fight, which therefore presents a borderline case of female martiality that could provide potentially interesting data to study through the prism of A. Testart's hypothesis.

## 2. Overview of the Ambā Story

The story of Ambā appears in Vyāsa's *Mahābhārata*, a vast epic poem that scholars generally date to between the 4th century BCE and the 4th century CE<sup>3</sup>. It is narrated in several places in the *Mahābhārata*: first briefly in Book<sup>4</sup> 1, *Ādiparvan* ‘the book of beginnings’ (chapter 96<sup>5</sup>), then in more detail in Book 5, *Udyogaparvan* ‘the book of preparations’ (chapters 169-193, which constitute the *Ambopākhyāna*<sup>6</sup>, ‘the episode about Ambā’) and finally during the fall of Bhīṣma, in Book 6, *Bhīṣmaparvan* ‘the book of Bhīṣma’ (41-117, in particular 112-114). In Book 5, preparations take place preceding the great eschatological battle between two rival groups of cousins: the five Pāṇḍava brothers against the hundred Kauravas led by King Duryodhana. The latter, along with allies from the Kaurava camp and Bhīṣma, the cousins' great uncle, assess the strengths of the two armies preparing to face each other. Bhīṣma draws up a list of enemy combatants, evaluating their warrior qualities, and considers Śikhaṇḍin to be an eminent warrior. While declaring himself ready to face any of these fighters, he indicates that he will not be able to fight Śikhaṇḍin because he refuses to fight or kill a woman or someone who was once a woman. Duryodhana asks for an explanation, and Bhīṣma tells the story of Ambā, who was transformed into a man named Śikhaṇḍin.

### 2.1 The wedding of the three sisters

Bhīṣma begins his story by recalling what happened at the wedding of the three princesses of Kāśī (Benares), Ambā, Ambikā, and Ambālikā, already recounted in Book 1. During the *svayamvara* wedding of the three daughters of the king of Kāśī, Bhīṣma abducted them on his chariot to give them in marriage to his half-brother Vicitravīrya, heir to the throne of Śāntanu and son of Satyawatī, the daughter of the king of fishermen. It should be remembered that Bhīṣma had renounced the throne and wedding so that his father could marry the beautiful Satyawatī and their sons could inherit the kingdom. But the eldest of the three sisters, Ambā, shirks wedding to Vicitravīrya because she is secretly engaged to Prince Śālva. Upon learning this news, Bhīṣma, understanding, released her, but Śālva, for his part, no longer wanted her because she had allowed herself to be taken away by Bhīṣma.

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<sup>3</sup> Renou and Filliozat, 1985, § 803. J. A. B. Van Buitenen estimates a range between the 5th century BCE and the 5th century CE (1973 : xxv). Madeleine Biardeau departs from the conventional view by dating the writing between 300 and 100 BCE (2002/1 : 21).

<sup>4</sup> The *Mahābhārata* is divided into eighteen *parvan* (‘books’ or ‘sections’), which are further subdivided into *adhyāya* (‘chapters’).

<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, Vaiśampāyana only tells the story of Ambā without mention of her rebirth.

<sup>6</sup> An *upākhyāna* is a story included within the frame story.

Leaving the city, Ambā laments, her parents having abandoned her and Śālva rejected and cast out, not knowing whether to blame herself, Bhīṣma who conquered her in a hard-fought battle, or her father who made her choose her husband. She has been thrown into Bhīṣma's chariot like a prostitute (*paṇyastri*, 5.173.5), she says. Finally deciding that Bhīṣma is responsible for her distress, she decides to take revenge on him and takes refuge in the hermitage of Śaikhāvatya. The ascetics remind the young princess of what the treatises on *dharma* (*Manusmṛti*: 5.148) recommend: a woman has only two recourses, her father or her husband. Since she has been abandoned by Prince Śālva, to whom she was promised, she must return to her father. But Ambā refuses, arguing that her parents will despise her. Ambā finds herself deprived of her *svadharma*, her proper duty, her role linked to her social status, which has also been fallen.

### 2.3 An angry, disgraced woman seeking revenge

Finding herself alone, Ambā is distressed and in tears, but she is also described as being filled with anger. She then considers that the only possible solution is revenge, ‘through asceticism or by force of arms’ (5.172.8). At first, she does not clearly express her desire to take up weapons herself. Before she undertakes asceticism, her maternal grandfather, visiting the hermitage, advises her to seek out Rāma Jāmadagnya, better known after the epic as Paraśurāma ‘Rāma with the axe’, a great Brahmin but also a warrior, famous for having exterminated the warrior class (*kṣatriya*). One of his disciples, Akṛtavraṇa, suddenly appeared.

After learning about Ambā's story from the latter and her grandfather, Akṛtavraṇa, who is expressly asked for his opinion, decides: Bhīṣma is guilty and it is right for Ambā to take revenge, literally a ‘counter-action’ (*pratikriyā*, 5.176.12). Upon hearing this, Ambā bluntly expresses her desire to have Bhīṣma killed, which she wishes to be carried out by Rāma Jāmadagnya. The latter arrives at the hermitage and Ambā entrusts herself to him. After learning the facts, he promises to try to reconcile with Bhīṣma and, if that fails, to take up weapons against him. Ambā, presenting Bhīṣma as the source of her misfortune (5.176.38), insists to Paraśurāma, saying repeatedly, ‘Kill Bhīṣma’. Paraśurāma therefore sets off to meet Bhīṣma. He asks him to take Ambā back so that she can fulfill her duty as a woman (5.178.6). Bhīṣma replies that he cannot under any circumstances return her to his brother and that it is his duty not to keep a woman who loves another man. The epic battle between the master Paraśurāma and his disciple Bhīṣma spans several chapters, with the advantage shifting back and forth between Rāma and Bhīṣma. The battle is long and ultimately fruitless<sup>7</sup>.

### 2.4 Extraordinary asceticism

Rāma Jāmadagnya comes back to Ambā to tell her about his defeat against Bhīṣma. Hearing this, Ambā changes her tune: she will ‘fight Bhīṣma herself’ (5.187.9). Her eyes filled with anger, meditating on his death (*cintayatī vadham*, 187.10), she wishes to practice asceticism. Whereas previously, asceticism and weapons were presented as two separate options (5.172.8), we now see that asceticism is presented as a means of enabling her to fight Bhīṣma herself, but

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<sup>7</sup> Collins sees this duel with Bhīṣma as an ‘exit myth’ of Rāma Jāmadagnya (2023). This duel is also considered as an analogue of Rāma Jāmadagnya's duel with Rāma son of Daśaratha in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Thomas, 1996; cited by Collins, 2023).

we do not yet know how this asceticism will enable her to achieve this martial goal. Aware of what Ambā is plotting in the forest, Bhīṣma is worried, but the sages Nārada and Vyāsa reassure him that no human can change his destiny. In contrast to these words of comfort emphasizing the limited nature of human action, Ambā's asceticism is described as 'superhuman' (*atimānuṣam*, 187.18) and lasts twelve years, during which she feeds on wind for six months (19), spends a year submerged in water, survives another year on a single dried leaf for food, standing on the tips of her big toes, as if sustained by her anger (21). Between the lines, we understand that by practicing superhuman asceticism, Ambā will succeed in thwarting fate. In stanza 32, Ambā's goal is finally made explicit: obtaining another body in order to fight Bhīṣma. She expresses this more clearly in the following chapter (188.4-9): she cannot defeat Bhīṣma as a woman with a peaceful mind, so she must become a man. During this asceticism, Bhīṣma's mother, who is none other than Gaṅgā, tries to dissuade Ambā and announces to her, in the form of a prediction that could be a curse<sup>8</sup>, that her asceticism will only allow her to be reborn as a winding river, often dry and full of crocodiles. Ambā persists nonetheless and is reborn as half river, as described by Gaṅgā, and half woman once again.

Then, in the next chapter, Ambā is still practicing asceticism when the god Śiva appears and offers her a wish: she naturally chooses to be able to defeat Bhīṣma in battle. Śiva grants her wish and tells her that she will be reborn as a man after sacrificing herself in the fire. In contrast to her own previous statements about the peaceful nature of women, she is described as having a mind inflamed with anger and immolates herself in fire, like a widow on her husband's funeral pyre, uttering these last words in mantra form: 'For the killing of Bhīṣma!' (*bhīṣmavadhāya*).

Although the ideological system of ancient India favors asceticism as a means of obtaining the fruit of one's desire and ultimately liberation from the cycle of rebirth, it is not common for young women to practice it. This is why several protagonists try to dissuade Ambā from practicing asceticism, especially one of such intensity: firstly, the ascetics she meets at the hermitage of Śaikhāvatya, some of whom believe she should return to her father, others to King Śālva, and who collectively warn her about the hardships of the ascetic life and the risks of being approached by kings while she is alone in the forest (174.10); but also Gaṅgā, who was undoubtedly seeking to protect her son (187.29-36) and who had also intervened during the fight between him and Rāma Jamadāgnya (179.22-30).

## 2.5 Rebirth, cross-dressing, martial training, and transidentity

After her immolation, Ambā is reborn as Śikhaṇḍinī, daughter of King Drupada, who had also performed asceticism while worshipping the god Śiva in order to obtain a son able to cause the death of Bhīṣma (189.5). Drupada had a daughter instead of a son, but Śiva reassured him : she will become a man. From birth, Śikhaṇḍinī was a cross-dressed boy (189.14): she received the birth rites appropriate for boys (189.17) and was called Śikhaṇḍin. Under this name and in the guise of a boy, she is initiated into archery by Droṇa (190.1), the illustrious master of arms in the epic who trained the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. She is then married to the daughter of King Hiranyavarman, who quickly discovers the trickery, leading to the threat of conflict

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<sup>8</sup> Biardeau, *op. cit.*, p. 1097.

between the two families. Śikhaṇḍinī, realizing that she is the cause of this tragedy, leaves in shame for the forest once again to perform austerities and end her life. She enters the dwelling of a *yakṣa* (semi-divine being), Sthūṇakarna, and begs him to transform her into a man to save her family. He accepts Śikhaṇḍinī's request, and she and the *yakṣa* exchange genders for a limited time. King Hiraṇyavarman sends an embassy of women to verify Śikhaṇḍin's gender, and the two families are reconciled.

Meanwhile, Kubera, the master of the *yakṣas*, goes to Sthūṇakarna, discovers what has happened and, believing that all the *yakṣas* have been humiliated by this change of sex, curses Sthūṇakarna, condemning him to remain a woman. At the appointed time, Śikhaṇḍinī returns to Sthūṇakarna, who tells her about the curse pronounced by Kubera. Now definitively a man, Śikhaṇḍin, delighted, returns home and continues his training in the art of archery under the guidance of Droṇa (5.193.56-57). It is at this point that Śikhaṇḍin's new status is announced (5.193.59):

*evam eṣa mahārāja strīpumān drupadātmajāḥ |*  
*saṃbhūtaḥ kauravaśreṣṭha śikhaṇḍī rathasattamaḥ ||5.193.59||*

Thus then, great king<sup>9</sup>, Śikhaṇḍin, the illustrious **male-female** child of Drupada, became a **great warrior**, best of the Kauravas. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 528)

## 2.6 Role on the battlefield

In Book 6, we find Śikhaṇḍin accompanying Arjuna during the great battle. Facing Bhīṣma, it is repeatedly stated that Śikhaṇḍin is placed in front, like a protective shield, since Bhīṣma, following his observance, cannot fight Śikhaṇḍin, who was previously a woman. Arjuna, sheltered by Śikhaṇḍin, shoots numerous arrows at Bhīṣma, who makes it known that these are Arjuna's arrows because they are painful, while Śikhaṇḍin's arrows are inactive, even pleasant. Bhīṣma eventually falls in battle: he is mortally wounded but suspends his death because he has the gift of choosing the moment (it will take place in book 13). In this battle, we see that Śikhaṇḍin's ambiguous gender, a woman who became a man or a 'man-woman', is essential and helps to strengthen the Pāṇḍava camp. Although technically a weakness (ineffective arrows), Śikhaṇḍin's presence is undeniably a tactical asset. Arjuna and Śikhaṇḍin thus functions as a couple: it is thanks to Śikhaṇḍin's presence that Arjuna manages to defeat Bhīṣma.

## 2.7 The Amba character's interest

This epic character has gained popularity in contemporary India, not so much among Hindu nationalists, who nevertheless enjoy rereading and reinterpreting ancient Indian texts, but rather among those who are sensitive to the causes of discriminated minorities and critical of patriarchy, as Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin embodies an example of queerness in ancient India and is invested with feminist activism. This is particularly evident in the book *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* by popular author Devdutt Pattanaik (2014), which presents, among thirty other mythical protagonists, the 'fantastic tale'<sup>10</sup> of Ambā. This story also inspired choreographer Akram Khan in *Until the Lions* (2016), based on the eponymous work by

<sup>9</sup> Bhīṣma is still addressing Duryodhana.

<sup>10</sup> Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 174.

Karthika Nair (2015), which gives voice to nineteen secondary protagonists from the epic. More recently, French composer Thierry Pécou and director-choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh drew on the same work to create an opera focusing on the protagonist Ambā (2022).

Reflecting society's interest in this character, academic studies about this atypical transgender being are also flourishing recently. Some studies focus on the issue of Ambā's gender change and rebirth (e.g., Vanita). Others present Ambā as an exceptional woman, a protagonist linked to Durgā, remind that she is a demonic reincarnation, or even consider her a victim of patriarchy. Some studies highlight the divine and philosophical symbolism of the episode (e.g., Adluri) or focus on the epic mythological journey of Rāma Jāmadagnya and the reactivation of Vedic mythemes (Collins). There is also a narratological study that emphasizes the polyphonic nature of the episode (Špicova). Apart from a paragraph by R. Vanita on Śikhaṇḍin's warrior status called 'How Great a Warrior Is Shikhandin?' (2022: 166-7), the analysis of Ambā's story from the perspective of her martial nature seems to be a path that has not yet been sufficiently explored.

### 3. Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin's martiality

#### 3.1 Signs of female martiality

##### 3.1.2 Warrior's anger and determination

Ambā's martial journey seems to begin with the expression of her psycho-emotional state. Indeed, we notice that she is full of a warrior-like anger quite different from that of the heroines of Sanskrit poetry, which is usually directed toward their lover and caused by jealousy<sup>11</sup>. The expression of this anger begins when she is rejected<sup>12</sup>, unjustly in her opinion, by Śālva:

yathā śālvapate nānyaṃ naraṃ dhyāmi kathaṃ cana |  
tvāṃ ṛte puruṣavyāghra tathā mūrdhānam ālabhe || 5.172.14||  
na cānyapūrvā rājendra tvāṃ ahaṃ samupasthitā |  
satyaṃ bravīmi śālvaitat satyenātmānam ālabhe || 5.172.15||  
bhajasva māṃ viśālākṣa svayaṃ kanyāṃ upasthitāṃ |  
ananyapūrvāṃ rājendra tvatprasādābhikāṅkṣiṇīm || 5.172.16||  
tām evaṃ bhāṣamāṇāṃ tu śālvaḥ kāśīpateḥ sutāṃ |  
atyajad bharataśreṣṭha tvacaṃ jīrṇāṃ ivoragaḥ || 5.172.17||  
evaṃ bahuvīdhair vākyair yācyamānas tayānagha |  
nāśraddadhac chālvapatih kanyāyā bharatarṣabha || 5.172.18||  
tataḥ sā manyunāviṣṭā jyeṣṭhā kāśīpateḥ sutā |  
abravīt sāśrunayanā bāṣpavihvalayā girā || 5.172.19||  
tvayā tyaktā gamiṣyāmi yatra yatra viśāṃ pate |  
tatra me santu gatayaḥ santaḥ satyaṃ yathābruvam ||5.172.20||

14<sup>13</sup>. 'I swear by my head that I have never dreamed of anyone at all but you, King Śālva, tiger among men!

<sup>11</sup> The heroines (nāyikā) of Sanskrit poetry have stereotypical characters. For example, that of the woman who is angry because of her lover's infidelity (khaṇḍitā nāyikā) is well known.

<sup>12</sup> Collins, based on Jamison's study about proto-Durgā in the Vedic Rājasūya sacrifice, compares Ambā to the dangerous figure of the Parivṛktī, a rejected wife who becomes violent and uncontrollable and can be used as a weapon (2023: 143-4).

<sup>13</sup> I added this numbering, which is not present in the translation by Buitenen, to help the reader.

15. It is not as another man's previous woman that I have come to you. I speak the truth, Śālva, I swear by my head it is the truth !
16. Love me, a girl come to you on her own, wide-eyed Indra of kings, not as another man's woman, hoping for your grace!
17. But although she pleaded in this way, Śālva rejected the daughter of the Kāśi king as a snake casts off its worn-out skin.
18. Though she begged him with various words, prince sans blame, King Śālva did not believe the girl, bull of the Bharatas.
19. With tears in her eyes she said, **overcome with anger**, in a sob-choked voice,
20. 'May the strict be my shelter, wherever I go, rejected by you: it is true what I have said'. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 498-99)

Then, after Rāma's defeat, or rather after the status quo of the battle between him and Bhīṣma, Ambā's anger is directed more specifically towards Bhīṣma, whom she holds responsible for her situation. This anger emotionally colors her resolution to undertake an ascetic practice in the hope that it will enable her to achieve her goal of defeating him in battle:

*na caiṣa śakyate yuddhe viśeṣayitum antataḥ |*  
*na cāham enaṃ yāsyāmi punar bhīṣmaṃ kathaṃ cana ||5.187.8||*  
*gamiṣyāmi tu tatrāhaṃ yatra bhīṣmaṃ tapodhana |*  
*samare pātayiṣyāmi svayam eva bhṛgūdvaḥ ||5.187.9||*  
*evam uktvā yayau kanyā roṣavyākulalocanā |*  
*tapase dhṛtasamkalpā mama cintayatī vadham ||5.187.10||*

- '8. And in the end he could not be surpassed in the fight. But I shall on no condition whatever go back to Bhīṣma again.
9. Rather I shall go there where **I myself can bring Bhīṣma down** in battle, ascetic, scion of Bhṛgu !'
10. Thus the maiden spoke, **her eyes rolling in anger**, and she set her mind on austerities, brooding on my death. (trans. Buitenen, Vol. 3, p. 518).

Her angry nature is also described when she practices extreme asceticism:

*śīrṇaparṇena caikena pārayām āsa cāparam |*  
*saṃvatsaram tīvrakopā pādāṅguṣṭhāgradhiṣṭhitā ||5.187.21||*

21. Another year she spent in subsisting on one withered leaf, **ferocious in her wrath**<sup>14</sup>, while standing on tiptoe<sup>15</sup>. (trans. Buitenen, Vol. 3, p. 519)

Finally, after Śiva promised her that she will be reborn as a man and will be able to kill Bhīṣma ('you will kill<sup>16</sup> him' he tells her in 5.188.8), she throws herself into a funeral pyre, as if burned by the fire of her anger, expressing her dearest wish one last time in a mantra-like formulation : *bhīṣmavadhāya* 'for the killing of Bhīṣma'.

*tataḥ sā paśyatām teṣāṃ maharṣīṇām aninditā |*  
*samāhṛtya vanāt tasmāt kāṣṭhāni varavarṇinī || 5.188.16||*  
*citām kṛtvā sumahatīm pradāya ca hutāśanam |*  
*pradīpte 'gnau mahārāja roṣadīptena cetasā || 5.188.17||*

<sup>14</sup> More precisely: 'having a ferocious wrath'.

<sup>15</sup> While Ambā's diet is particularly surprising and unusual, the practice of standing on tiptoes, mentioned in *Manusmṛti* (6.22), is recommended for forest hermits.

<sup>16</sup> *vadhiṣyasi* from root *VADH-* more certainly means 'to kill' than 'to strike' which differs from the use of the root *HAN-*, more common when referring to Ambā's plan but also more ambiguous.

uktvā **bhīṣmavadhā**yeti praviveśa hutāśanam |  
jyeṣṭhā kāśisutā rājan yamunām abhito nadīm ||5.188.18||

16. Thereupon, while the great seers were looking on, the blameless, fair-complexioned maiden gathered firewood from that forest, made a very high pyre, and set fire to it.

17. When the fire was blazing, great king, she spoke **with her heart on fire with wrath**,

18. **‘For Bhīṣma's death !’** and entered the fire, did the eldest daughter of Kāśi by the bank of the Yamunā, king. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 520-21)

Another martial, but also yogic, feature of character can also be observed in the description of our protagonist: that of determination<sup>17</sup>, expressed in particular by derivatives of the root *DHR-* ‘to hold’<sup>18</sup>, in the practice of asceticism (187.14, 188.1) and in achieving one's goal (188.5):

yadaiva hi vanam prāyāt kanyā sā tapase **dhṛtā** |  
tadaiva vyathito dīno gatacetā ivābhavam ||5.187.14||

From the very day that the maiden departed for the forest **set on** austerities. I became troubled, wretched, and well-nigh lost my wits. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 518)

In this stanza, we note the contrast between her description and that of Bhīṣma, a great warrior, whose mind is no longer determined, as it should be, but confused. This description is reminiscent of the state of a lover separated from his beloved, and may lead us to think that Ambā and Bhīṣma form symbolically a kind of couple whose love is thwarted.

The following extract is particularly rich in expressions of Ambā's will and determination, who cannot be diverted from her goals:

tatas te tāpasāḥ sarve tapase **dhṛtaniścayām** |  
dṛṣṭvā nyavartayaṃs tāta kiṃ kāryam iti cābruvan ||5.188.1||  
tān uvāca tataḥ kanyā tapovṛddhān ṛṣīṃs tadā |  
nirākṛtāsmi bhīṣmeṇa bhraṃśitā patidharmataḥ ||5.188.2||  
vadhārtham tasya **dīkṣā** me na lokārtham tapodhanāḥ |  
nihatya bhīṣmaṃ gaccheyam śāntim ity eva **niścayaḥ** ||5.188.3||  
yatkr̥te duḥkhavasatim imāṃ prāptāsmi śāśvatīm  
patilokād vihinā ca naiva strī na pumān iha ||5.188.4||  
nāhatvā yudhi gāṅgeyam **nivarteyam** tapodhanāḥ |  
**eṣa me hr̥di samkalpo** yadartham idam **udyatam** ||5.188.5||  
strībhāve parinirvīṇṇā puṃstvārthe **kr̥taniścayā** |  
bhīṣme praticikīrṣāmi **nāsmi vāryeti vai punaḥ** ||5.188.6||

1. The ascetics, seeing her **set on** austerities, tried to stop her and said, ‘What do you seek to achieve?’

2. The maiden replied to the seers, who had grown old in austerities, ‘I have been rejected by Bhīṣma and cannot abide by the Law I owe a husband.

3. I am **consecrated** to his death, not to a higher world, ascetics! I have **resolved** that only by killing Bhīṣma I shall find peace.

4-5. **I shall not desist**, brahmins, until I have slain Gaṅgā's son in battle, him because of whom I have found this everlasting life of misery, deprived of the world of a husband, neither a woman nor a man!

**That resolve is lodged in my heart**, and for that **I have undertaken this vow**.

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<sup>17</sup> Her determination can also be likened to the 'same kind of single-minded dedication to one man' associated with the *pativratā dharma* (Dhand, 2008: 193).

<sup>18</sup> *Dhairya* ‘firmness’ is a fundamental virtue of the warrior, thanks to which he does not retreat on the battlefield and holds his position (Brocquet, 2023: 109).

6. I am totally disgusted with being a woman and **I have resolved** to become a man: I want to pay Bhīṣma back, and **I am not to be diverted**, she repeated. (trans. Buitenen, Vol. 3, p. 520)

### 3.1.3. *Desire for revenge and murder*

After being rejected, Ambā does not dwell on her fate for long. She quickly expresses her desire (*kāma*), eminently martial, for murderous revenge against Bhīṣma, whom she holds responsible for her distress. She speaks to Rāma as follows:

*mamāpy eṣa mahān brahman hr̥dī kāmo 'bhivartate |  
ghātayeyaṃ yadi raṇe bhīṣmam ity eva nityadā || 5.176.13||*

**This the fierce desire of my heart**, brahmin : ‘**if only I could have Bhīṣma killed in battle!**’ (trans. Buitenen, Vol. 3, p. 503)

Later, she insists :

*eṣa me hriyamāṇāyā bhāratena tadā vibho |  
abhavat dhṛdī saṃkalpo ghātayeyaṃ mahāvratam ||5.176.41||  
tasmāt kāmaṃ mamādyemaṃ rāma saṃvartayānagha |  
jahi bhīṣmaṃ mahābāho yathā vṛtram purāṇdarah ||5.176.42||*

41. When the Bhārata was abducting me, **I conceived in my heart the plan to have that man of great vows killed**, my lord.

42. Therefore, strong-armed, blameless Lord Rāma, fulfil my **desire** : **kill Bhīṣma** as the Sacker of Cities slew Vṛtra<sup>19</sup>! (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 503).

The idea of her desire (*kāma*) or her resolution (*saṃkalpa*) to kill, lodged in his heart, will be repeated again in 5.188.5 already quoted above. In these extracts, the use of the word *kāma* does not seem insignificant to us. As the official path of *kāma* for women, namely marriage, is no longer accessible to her, her *kāma* seems to change its goal and transform into a desire for death. In the background, we perceive an analogy between married life and combat.

On several occasions—and repetition is common in her speech (which, let us remember, is reported by Bhīṣma), another sign of her determination—she tells Rāma to kill Bhīṣma in the form of an injunction : ‘*jahi bhīṣmam*’. This litany marks her speech (5 occurrences) as can be seen in the above-mentioned stanza (5.176.42) or the one preceding it:

*bhīṣmaṃ jahi mahābāho yatkr̥te duḥkham īdr̥śam |  
prāptāhaṃ bhṛguśārdūla carāmy apriyam uttamam || 5.176.39 ||*

**Kill Bhīṣma**, strong-armed tiger of the Bhṛguś, because of whom I have fallen in such grief and wander in utter misery! (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 503)

### 3.1.4 *Access to martial training*

When she is reborn as Śikhāṇḍinī, daughter of Drupada, she receives martial training, in the guise of a man, but still as a woman:

*tataḥ sa rājā drupadaḥ pracchannāyā narādhipa |  
putravat putrakāryāṇi sarvāṇi samakārayat ||5.189.14||  
[...]*

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<sup>19</sup> This is here a reference to the ‘paradigmatic Vedic cattle raid’ (Collins, 2023: 130). In this paper, Collins interprets Ambā’s story as a reactivation of this myth in which Ambā can be seen as a stolen calf.

*jātakarmāṇi sarvāṇi kārāyām āsa pārthivah |*  
**pumvad** *vidhānayuktāni śikhaṇḍīti ca tām viduḥ || 5.189.17 ||*

[...]

*cakāra yatnaṃ drupadaḥ sarvasmin svajane mahat |*  
*tato lekhyādiṣu tathā śilpeṣu ca paraṃ gatā |*  
**iṣvastre** *caiva rājendra droṇaśiṣyo babhūva ha || 5.190.1 ||*

5.189.14. King Drupada then had all the rites pertaining to a son performed for the concealed daughter as though she were a son. [...] 5.189.17. The king had all the birth rites performed which go with the injunction **concerning a man child**, and people knew him as Śikhaṇḍin. [...] 5.190.1. Drupada spent great efforts on his entire family. Śikhaṇḍinī became very skilled in painting and so forth, and in the crafts, and was **a pupil of Droṇa in archery**, a Indra of kings. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 521-22)

It should be noted that Śikhaṇḍinī-Śikhaṇḍin is trained in archery, which is a weapon that can pierce bodies, which at first glance does not seem to fit with A. Testart's observations and conclusions. But we will see later that her arrows are quite special.

After the definitive sex change, Śikhaṇḍin's martial training, focused on the art of archery and still taught by the illustrious tutor Droṇa, is mentioned again:

*śiṣyārthaṃ pradadau cāpi droṇāya kurupumgava |*  
*śikhaṇḍinaṃ mahārāja putraṃ strīpūrvinaṃ tathā || 5.193.56 ||*  
*pratipede catuṣpādaṃ dhanurvedaṃ nṛpātmajaḥ |*  
*śikhaṇḍī saha yuṣmābhir dhr̥ṣṭadyumnaś ca pārṣataḥ || 5.193.57 ||*

56. He gave Śikhaṇḍin **to Droṇa as his student**, great king, bull of the Kurus, this son who had been a woman before.

57. **Prince** Śikhaṇḍin and Dhr̥ṣṭadyumna Pārṣata<sup>20</sup> learned **the four-part science of archery**<sup>21</sup>, along with all of you<sup>22</sup>.

Śikhaṇḍin was therefore trained by the master of weapons Droṇa, along with the main protagonists of the epic, the two groups of cousins. He would later be involved in the battle on the side of the Pāṇḍavas.

### 3.1.5 On the battlefield as a man-woman

Once Śikhaṇḍinī definitively exchanged her sex (*liṅga*) with that of the *yakṣa* and became a man, it is clear that this being nevertheless keeps an ambiguous status. Although she asked the *yakṣa* to become an *anindita* 'without blame' (5.192.29) man and Hiraṇyavarman's messengers noted that he was a man 'of great authority' (*mahānubhāva*, 5.193.26), Śikhaṇḍin is clearly designated as a 'man-woman' ('*strī-puṃs-*' as we saw in 5.193.59 above), that is, a being of dual or ambiguous gender, and it is as such that he-she (or maybe should we say 'they'?) appears on the battlefield alongside Arjuna. The persistent presence of a feminine feature in this character on the battlefield is of paramount importance because it gives Arjuna a tactic advantage over Bhīṣma, the latter following the observance (*vrata*) that he formulates as follows:

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<sup>20</sup> Son of Drupada, who will carry out his father's wish for revenge by killing Droṇa.

<sup>21</sup> Buitenen translated by 'weaponry' but *dhanus* means precisely 'bow'.

<sup>22</sup> Duryodhana.

*nāham enaṃ dhanuṣpāṇiṃ yuyutsum samupasthitam  
 muhūrtam api paśyeyaṃ prahareyaṃ na cāpy uta ||5.193.61||  
 vratam etan mama sadā pṛthivyāṃ api viśrutam |  
 striyāṃ strīpūrvake cāpi strīnāṃni strīśvarūpiṇi ||5.193.62||  
 na muñceyaṃ ahaṃ bāṇān iti kauravanandana  
 na hanyāṃ aham etena kāraṇena śikhaṇḍinam ||5.193.63||  
 etat tattvam ahaṃ veda janma tāta śikhaṇḍinaḥ  
 tato nainaṃ haniṣyāmi samareṣv ātatāyinaṃ ||5.193.64||  
 yadi bhīṣmaḥ striyaṃ hanyād dhanyād ātmānam apy uta |  
 nainaṃ tasmād dhanīṣyāmi dṛṣṭvāpi samare sthitam ||5.193.65||*

61. When he encounters me with bow in hand eager to fight, **I shall not look** at him even for a moment, and **I shall refuse to hit** him.

62-63. This my **vow** has always been renowned in the whole world: **that I shall shoot no arrows at a woman, a former woman, one with the name of a woman, and an apparent woman**, joy of the Kauravas, and for this reason I shall not kill [Śikhaṇḍin.

64. I know the truth about Śikhaṇḍin's birth, so I will not fight him]<sup>23</sup> when he bends his bow<sup>24</sup> in battle.

65. Were a Bhīṣma to kill a woman he would kill himself; therefore I shall not kill him, though I may see him on the field of battle. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 528)

Upon reading this extract, the sagacious reader will undoubtedly already have understood why Bhīṣma risks death by killing Śikhaṇḍin; we will return to this point at the end of this study.

In addition to the statement about Śikhaṇḍin's ambiguous gender status, several other passages indicate that Śikhaṇḍin remains fundamentally a woman. For example:

*pūrvam hi strī samutpannā śikhaṇḍī rājaveśmani  
 varadānāt pumāñ jātaḥ saiṣā vai strī śikhaṇḍinī ||6.94.16||  
 tām ahaṃ na haniṣyāmi prāṇatyāge 'pi bhārata  
 yāsau prāñ nirmīta dhātṛā saiṣā vai strī śikhaṇḍinī ||6.94.17||*

16. First he was born in the royal palace as a female, Śikhaṇḍinī; then, through a boon, she became a male.

17. I'll not strike him even at the cost of my life, descendant of Bharata, for that one is the same woman Śikhaṇḍinī as was originally made by the Creator. (trans. Cherniak<sup>25</sup>, vol. 1, p. 283)

*kāraṇadvayam āsthāya nāhaṃ yotsyāmi pāṇḍavaiḥ  
 avadhyatvāc ca pāṇḍūnāṃ strībhāvāc ca śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.114.32||*

For two reasons I will not fight against the Pāṇḍavas : because of the invincibility of the Pāṇḍavas and because of Śikhaṇḍin's womanhood. (trans. Špicová, p. 293).

We can therefore say that Śikhaṇḍin embodies a male-female, or inherently female, character and that it is as such that he-she appears on the battlefield. We have seen that before this sex change, the woman Ambā expresses anger, determination, and a desire to kill that are typical of warriors, then, as Śikhaṇḍinī in the guise of man, but still a woman, is taught the science of

<sup>23</sup> I have modified Buitenen's translation here, and added content in brackets, as he omitted part of the stanza.

<sup>24</sup> Translation of Buitenen: 'when he ambushes me'.

<sup>25</sup> Regarding Cherniak's translation, I added stanza numbering and modified the transliteration of proper names to harmonize with the other quotations. Cherniak based his work on Kinjawadekar's edition, which differs in some details from the critical edition. I therefore modified Cherniak's translation to fit the text of the critical edition.

weapons. One might infer from this episode that it presents a case of female martiality. But other textual clues reveal that femininity remains fundamentally outside the realm of martiality.

## 3.2 Signs of persistent ontological incompatibility

### 3.2.1 A woman cannot fight

Indeed, at first, it does not seem possible for her to accomplish this act of revenge by herself, which is why her wish can only be realized by involving a second agent (causative value): *ghāṭayeyam yadi raṇe bhīṣmam* (5.176.13cd) ‘If I could have Bhīṣma killed in battle’. She asks Rāma Jāmadagnya to defeat Bhīṣma but the fight ends deadlocked. As the long battle proves fruitless, Ambā changes her discourse: she will fight herself (cf. *supra* 5.187.9 *bhīṣmam* [...]) *samare pātayisyāmi*<sup>26</sup> *svayam* ‘I myself will bring Bhīṣma down in battle’) and begins superhuman asceticism to obtain the fruit of her desire.

But Ambā knows very well that she cannot fight as a woman; she must obtain another body. She states this clearly and for the first time when she speaks to Gaṅgā, Bhīṣma's mother, who tries to dissuade her from her project:

*carāmi pṛthivīm devi yathā hanyām ahaṃ nr̥pam |*  
*etad vrataphalaṃ dehe parasmīn syād yathā hi me ||5.187.32||*

I roam the earth, Goddess, so that I may kill the king. May this be the fruit of my vow **in another body!**  
(trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 519)

In 5.188.6 (already cited above), she expresses her disgust — she says that she is *parinirviṇṇā* — at being a woman and her decision to become a man and take revenge on Bhīṣma. In this stanza, we can understand that her desire to become a man stems primarily from her disgust at being a woman or from her life as a woman as it has gone so far. If we look closely at the stanza, there is no logical connection between the expression of her resolution to become a man and her plan for revenge.

*strībhāve parinirviṇṇā puṁstvārthe kṛtaniścayā |*  
*bhīṣme praticikīrṣāmi nāsmi vāryeti vai punaḥ ||5.188.6||*

I am **totally disgusted with being a woman** and I have resolved to become a man: I want to pay Bhīṣma back, and I am not to be diverted’, she repeated. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 520)

A little further on, the impossibility of a woman to fight is made explicit in the form of a rhetorical question she asks Śiva: *upapadyet katham deva striyo mama jayo yudhi* ‘How can it be that I, a woman, will triumph in battle [God]?’ (5.188.9cd, trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 520). The latter predicts two successive actions: *vadhiṣyasi raṇe bhīṣmam puruṣatvam ca lapsyase* ‘Thou shalt attain manhood and slay Bhīṣma in battle’<sup>27</sup> (5.188.12ab, trans. Buitenen, vol. 3,

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<sup>26</sup> It is worth noting that the causative *pātayati*, which literally means ‘to cause to fall’, is weaker, from a martial point of view, than *mārayati*, √HAN- or √VADH-.

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that this segment could also be understood in the opposite sense: ‘You will slay Bhīṣma in battle *and* will attain manhood’. This interpretation would lead us to the idea that practicing a typically masculine activity would enable an individual to attain the state of masculinity.

p. 520). The coordinating conjunction *ca* ‘and’ remains elusive and leaves it up to the reader to make the implied causal link between masculinity and access to combat.

### 3.2.2 Not your typical warrior

While translations may sometimes lead us to think that Śikhaṇḍin becomes a warrior like any other, a careful examination of the lexicon reveals that Śikhaṇḍin is never referred to by certain terms commonly used to designate a warrior in Sanskrit, such as *vīra* (male man and by extension ‘hero’, ‘warrior’), *yodha* ‘fighter’ (from *YUDH-* ‘to fight’), or *mahābāhu* (‘long-armed’ warrior). He is more readily referred to as a person who fights on his chariot, whereas there are a few rare occurrences of expressions using terms derived from *vīra-* and *YUDH-*. Let us look at these extracts in detail.

*pāñcālarājasya suto rājan parapuramjayah |*  
*śikhaṇḍī rathamukhyo me mataḥ pārthasya bhārata ||5.168.1||*  
*eṣa yotsyati saṃgrāme nāśayan pūrvasaṃsthitim |*  
*paraṃ yaśo viprathayaṃ tava senāsu bhārata ||5.168.2||*  
*etasya bahulāḥ senāḥ pāñcālās ca prabhadrakāḥ |*  
*tenāsau rathavaṃśena mahat karma kariṣyati ||5.168.3||*

Śikhaṇḍin, the son of the king of Pāñcāla, **conqueror of enemy strongholds**, appears to me a **preeminent Warrior**, on the Pārtha's side, Bhārata. He **shall fight** in the war destroying the old establishment, spreading his great fame in your armies, Bhārata. He has many troops, Pāñcālas and Prabhadrakas, and **with his chariot train** he will accomplish great feats. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 491)

In this first extract, Bhīṣma describes the forces involved and portrays Śikhaṇḍin as a conqueror (*jaya-* from *Ji-* ‘to conquer’). He is also the agent of a verb denoting combat activity: *yotsyati* from *YUDH-*. The term translated as ‘preeminent Warrior’ by Buitenen deserves our attention because this translation corresponds to the *tatpuruṣa* compound *ratha-mukhya-*, which literally means the best of chariot’s possessor. In this context, the one who owns a chariot is the one who fights from his chariot<sup>28</sup> (*ratha-* means ‘chariot’ and, by metonymy, its driver, that is a charioteer, or the warrior fighting from a chariot). His chariot is mentioned again in 5.168.3c.

Later, when Bhīṣma gives biographical details about Śikhaṇḍin to the curious Duryodhana, he narrates what Śiva predicted to Ambā:

*drupadasya kule jātā bhaviṣyasi mahārathah |*  
*śīghrāstrāś citrayodhī ca bhaviṣyasi susaṃmataḥ || 5.188.13||*

Thou shalt be born a **great warrior** in the House of Drupada; thou shalt become a **nimble arms man** and a much honored exemplary **warrior**. (Trans. Buitenen, Vol. 3, p. 520)

Once again, we find an expression referring to Śikhaṇḍin as a great chariot-<fighter> (*mahāratha-*). Other qualifiers belonging to the martial lexical field are used to describe him: he holds fast (*śīghra-*) throwing weapons (*astra-*) and he is an excellent or manifold fighter (*citra-yodhin-*). So, in these two extracts, in addition to ‘chariot-<fighter>’, other expressions belonging to the lexical field of martial arts are also used to describe him with terms derived from the roots *Ji-* and *YUDH-*. But these two excerpts are in the future tense and seem to present

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<sup>28</sup> The chariot driver of Arjuna is Kṛṣṇa who is referred to by a different word in this episod ‘*sārathi-*’: see further on in 6.114.23.

an idealized Śikhaṇḍin. Subsequently, when reference is made to Śikhaṇḍin, we will see that his martial status is radically reduced to that of a ‘<fighter> from or with a chariot’. First in 5.193.59 already quoted above, after the sex-change and when his new state is announced, he is *rathasattama*- ‘the best of the chariot-<fighter>’. In Book 6, whose study is particularly relevant because it contains descriptions of the battles, we see that Śikhaṇḍin is not described in the same way as the other warriors. In an extract where Saṃjaya reports to Dhṛtarāṣṭra that Bhīṣma was killed by Śikhaṇḍin on the tenth day of the battle and is lying on a bed of arrows, the difference in lexicon used to portray Śikhaṇḍin on the one hand and Bhīṣma and the other warriors on the other is quite obvious:

*saṃjaya 'haṃ mahārāja namas te bharatarṣabha |*  
*hato bhīṣmaḥ śāmtanavo bharatānām pitāmahaḥ ||6.14.3||*  
*kakudaṃ sarvayodhānām dhāma sarvadhanuṣmatām |*  
*śaratalpagataḥ so 'dya śete kurupitāmahaḥ ||6.14.4||*  
*yasya vīryaṃ samāśṛitya dyūtaṃ putras tavākarot |*  
*sa śete nihato rājan saṃkhye bhīṣmaḥ śikhaṇḍinā ||6.14.5||*  
*yaḥ sarvān prthivīpālān samavetān mahāmṛdhe |*  
*jigāyāikarathenaiva kāśipuryām mahārathaḥ ||6.14.6||*  
*jāmadagnyaṃ raṇe rāmam āyodhya vasusaṃbhavaḥ |*  
*na hato jāmadagnyena sa hato 'dya śikhaṇḍinā ||6.14.7||*  
*mahendrasadrśaḥ śaurye sthairye ca himavān iva |*  
*samudra iva gāmbhīrye sahiṣṇutve dharāsamaḥ ||6.14.8||*  
*śaradaṃśtro dhanurvakraḥ khaḍgajihvo durāsadaḥ |*  
*narasiṃhaḥ pitā te 'dya pāñcālyena nipātitaḥ ||6.14.9||*  
*pāṇḍavānām mahat sainyaṃ yaṃ dṛṣṭvodyantam āhave |*  
*pravepata bhayodvignaṃ siṃhaṃ dṛṣṭveva gogaṇaḥ ||6.14.10||*  
*parirakṣya sa senām te daśarātram anīkahā |*  
*jagāmāstam ivādityaḥ kṛtvā karma suduṣkaram ||6.14.11||*  
*yaḥ sa śakra ivākṣobhyo varṣan bāṇān sahasraśaḥ |*  
*jaghāna yudhi yodhānām arbudaṃ daśabhir dinaiḥ ||6.14.12||*  
*sa śete niṣṭanan bhūmau vātarugṇa iva drumah |*  
*tava durmantrite rājan yathā nārhaḥ sa bhārata ||6.14.13||*

3. I am Saṃjaya, great king. Obeisance to you, bull of the Bharatas. Bhīṣma, the son of Śāntanu, the grandfather of the Bharatas, has been slain.

4. **The foremost of all warriors, the power of all archers**, the grandfather of the Kurus today lies on a bed of arrows.

5. That Bhīṣma, Your Majesty, relying on whose **might** your son ventured the game of dice, today lies on the battlefield, **struck down** by Śikhaṇḍin.

6. The **great warrior** who, **alone on a chariot, defeated** in the great battle of the city of Kāśī all the kings of the earth assembled together,

7. This incarnation of a Vasu<sup>29</sup> who **fought** Rāma, the son of Jāmadagni in combat, he whom the son of Jāmadagni failed to destroy - it is he who has been killed today by Śikhaṇḍin.

8-9. Resembling great Indra in **valor** and Himavat in **firmness**, equal to the ocean in profundity and to the earth in patience, that **unconquerable** lion among men who had arrows for his teeth, a bow for his mouth, and a sword for his tongue, your **father has been struck down by the prince of the Pāñcala**.

10. The great army of the Pāṇḍavas trembled when they beheld his eagerness for battle, like a herd of

<sup>29</sup> Cherniak translates the reading *yo 'yudhyad apasaṃbhramaḥ* as ‘he who fearlessly fought’. Ganguli also translates *apasaṃbhramaḥ* as ‘fearlessly’. We believe the term more accurately means ‘without agitation’, even if this state of confusion may be rooted in fear.

cows stricken with fear at the sight of a lion.

11. He protected your army for ten nights; and now that **striker of <enemy> forces** has set like the sun<sup>30</sup>.

12. He who like **Śakra** unceasingly showered arrows by the thousand, who **killed** a hundred million warriors in ten days, now lies on the ground, wailing<sup>31</sup>, like a tree felled by the wind as a result of your bad advice, Your Majesty, though he little deserved such a fate, descendant of Bharata! (trans. Cherniak, vol. 1, p. 107 and p. 109)

In this extract, we see that Bhīṣma's portrait is extremely martial: he is the 'foremost of all warriors' (*kakudaṃ sarvayodhānām*), 'the power of all archers' (*dhāma sarvadhanuṣmatām*), he is holder of *vīrya* (virile energy), *mahāratha* ('great chariot-<fighter>', translated as 'great warrior' by Cherniak) and *durāsada* (unconquerable), etc.; the other warriors are twice described as *yodha* (warrior); while Śikhaṇḍin, whose exploit is narrated and who is on the side of the Pāṇḍavas, is never referred to as a warrior. He is simply referred to by his name or lineage: *pāñcālya*, meaning 'prince of Pañcala'. It should also be noted that the verb forms he is the agent of are derived from the roots *HAN-* and *PAT-*, but never *YUDH-*, which in this extract is reserved for Bhīṣma (7b).

Of course, Śikhaṇḍin is only a secondary protagonist alongside Bhīṣma, and in this extract, the focus is more on recounting the latter's downfall than on the feat of the one who caused it—in fact, it is more Arjuna's feat than Śikhaṇḍin's—but the lexical difference still seems significant to us.

A look at the vocabulary in chapter 6.114, which tells the story of Bhīṣma's fall, also confirms this difference: Bhīṣma and the other warriors, including Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, are constantly referred to as 'great <fighter> with a chariot' (*mahārathā-*: 11, 19, 51), 'tormentors of enemies' (*paraṃtapa-*: 25), 'great archers' (*maheṣvāsa-*: 35, 50, 85) and, of course, 'heroes' (*vīra-*: 6, 30, 35, 52, 109) or 'possessor of virile energy' (*vīryavat-*: 112) and 'warriors' (*yodha-*: 73) 'with great might' (*mahābala-*: 31, 108) and arms (*mahābāhu-*: 38, 84). In this chapter, we found only one occurrence of a term belonging to the semantic field of warfare to describe Śikhaṇḍin; this in itself is significant, and moreover, this term refers to him as a great <fighter> with a chariot (*rathaśreṣṭha-*):

śikhaṇḍī tu **rathaśreṣṭho** rakṣyamāṇaḥ kirīṭinā |  
avidhyad daśabhir bhīṣmaṃ chinnadhanvānam āhave |  
sārathim daśabhiś cāsya dhvajam caikena cicchide ||6.114.23||

Śikhaṇḍin, an **excellent fighter**, protected by diadem-decorated Arjuna, pierced bowless Bhīṣma with ten arrows in that conflict, wounded his chariot driver with another ten, and cut down his banner with one more. (trans. Cherniak, vol. 1, p. 481).

We note the expression 'excellent fighter', which in fact translates another lesson from the text that Cherniak used: '*raṇe śreṣṭhaḥ*' literally 'the best in combat'. It seems significant that the only occurrence we found of a martial term used to describe Śikhaṇḍin appears only in certain

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<sup>30</sup> Original translation by Cherniak, which differs from the Sanskrit text and which we have therefore modified: 'He protected feats of valor; and now that destroyer of enemy forces has set like the sun'.

<sup>31</sup> Cherniak translated 'struck down in combat', which corresponds to the reading *sa śete nihato bhūmau*. In the BORI edition, instead of *nihto*, we read *niṣṭanan*, which seems to mean 'sounding' (present participle in the nominative, masculine, singular of *niṣ-ṬAN-*). We have modified the translation accordingly.

versions of the text; ‘*raṇe śreṣṭhaḥ*’ describes a vague excellence on the battlefield rather than his social status.

At no point is Śikhaṇḍin described using the usual term *vīra*-, and we have found only one occurrence where he is described using a term derived from *YUDH*- (see above 5.188.13c). This observation should be slightly qualified, as we have found one occurrence where *vīrya* (a derivative from *vīra*- which can mean ‘heroism’ or ‘virility’) is nevertheless associated with Śikhaṇḍin. Let us look at the passage in question:

*asakṛt kṣatriyavrātāḥ saṃkhye yena vinirjitāḥ |*  
*jāmadagnyena vīreṇa paravīranighātīnā || 6.15.45||*  
*[na hato yo mahābuddhiḥ, sa hato 'dya śikhaṇḍinā]*<sup>32</sup>  
*tasmān nūnaṃ mahāvīryād bhārgavād yuddhadurmadāt |*  
*tejavīryabalair bhūyān śikhaṇḍī drupadātmajāḥ ||6.15.46||*  
*yaḥ sūraṃ kṛtināṃ yuddhe sarvaśāstraviśāradam |*  
*paramāstravidam vīraṃ jaghāna bharatarśabham ||6.15.47||*

That man of great intelligence was not vanquished even by Jamadagni's son, by that illustrious **warrior**, the crusher of enemy heroes, who had repeatedly routed hosts of kṣatriyas. And today he has been slain by Śikhaṇḍin! It means that Śikhaṇḍin, the son of Drupada, **is superior in energy, vigor and strength** to that mighty descendant of Bhṛgu, ferocious in battle, since he has succeeded in striking down in battle that valiant and accomplished combatant, a true expert in all scriptures, skillful in wielding the highest weapon, that heroic bull of the Bharatas. (trans. Cherniak, vol. 1, p. 117)

In this extract, we see that Śikhaṇḍin's martial nature and the qualities that could be attributed to him are only mentioned in relation to his victory over Bhīṣma, who is described as a great warrior hero. If he managed to defeat him in battle, it is because he possesses energy (*tejas*), vigor (*vīrya*), and strength superior to those of Bhīṣma. By analogy, all of Bhīṣma's other martial qualities, which are described at length, could be attributed to him, but the text does not say so explicitly. All of these extracts question Śikhaṇḍin's status as a warrior, and we are tempted to see here an impossibility to define Śikhaṇḍin as a *vīra* or *yodha* like the others<sup>33</sup> and to state his martial nature. The point about his arrows will confirm it.

### 3.2.3 Fast but inactive arrows

The question of Śikhaṇḍin's arrows caught our attention because, as Testart noted in a completely different context, a hunter's arrows can become ineffective because of women: ‘In southern Africa, if the hunter does not abstain from all relations with his wife, the poison with which his arrows are coated will have no effect’ (Testart, 2014: 27)<sup>34</sup>. In a similar way, Śikhaṇḍin's arrows are ineffective. Let us look at several extracts that illustrate this:

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<sup>32</sup> Exceptionally, we provide here the text followed and translated by Cherniak with the addition of a hemistich between stanzas 45 and 46, as we find the construction of the text in the critical edition puzzling: *asakṛt kṣatriyavrātāḥ saṃkhye yena vinirjitāḥ |*  
*jāmadagnyas tathā rāmaḥ paravīranighātīnā ||* followed immediately by *tasmān nūnaṃ mahāvīryād [...]*  
In this case, *paravīranighātīnā* refers to Bhīṣma and not to Rāma.

<sup>33</sup> The point was also highlighted by Vanita regarding his ability to kill (2022: 159).

<sup>34</sup> ‘En Afrique australe, si le chasseur ne s'abstient pas de tout rapport avec sa femme, le poison dont sont enduites ses flèches sera sans effet’.

*śikhaṇḍī tu raṇe rājan vivyādhaiva pitāmaham |*  
*śarair aśanisamaṣparśais tathā sarpaṣopamaiḥ ||6.112.98||*  
*na ca te 'sya rujaṃ cakruḥ pitus tava janeśvara |*  
*smayamānaś ca gāṅgeyas tān bāṇāñ jagrhe tadā ||6.112.99||*  
*uṣṇārto hi naro yadvaj jaladhārāḥ pratīcchati |*  
*tathā jagrāha gāṅgeyaḥ śaradhārāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.112.100||*  
*taṃ kṣatriyā mahārāja dadṛśur ghoram āhave |*  
*bhīṣmaṃ dahantaṃ sainyāni pāṇḍavānāṃ mahātmanām ||6.112.101||*

Then Śikhaṇḍin cut the grandfather in combat with his shafts [whose impact was like lightning and that were like the poison of a snake]<sup>35</sup>, Your Majesty. But those shafts did not inflict any pain on your father, lord of the people; the son of Gaṅgā received them with a **smile**. **As a man who is tormented by heat welcomes torrents of rain**, so the son of Gaṅgā received the torrents of Śikhaṇḍin's arrows. Great king, the warriors saw how terrifying Bhīṣma was in battle, as he incinerated the host of the great-spirited Pāṇḍavas. (trans. Cherniak, vol. 2, p. 461)

In addition to being ineffective from a martial perspective, we see that the contact of Śikhaṇḍin's arrows gives Bhīṣma pleasure that seems to us to be not far from erotic pleasure. The following passage explains everything that Śikhaṇḍin's arrows are not and, by contrast, highlights the formidable effectiveness of Arjuna's arrows:

*vajrāśanisamasparśā arjunena śarā yudhi |*  
*muktāḥ sarve 'vyavacchinnā neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.119.61||*  
*nikṛntamānā marmāṇi dṛḍhāvaraṇabhedinaḥ |*  
*musalā īva me ghnanti neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.119.62||*  
*brahmadāṇḍasamasparśā vajravegā durāsadāḥ |*  
*mama prāṇān ārujanti neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.119.63||*  
*nāśayantīva me prāṇān yamadūtā ivāhitāḥ |*  
*gadāparighasaṃsparśā neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.119.64||*  
*bhujagā iva saṃkrudhā lelihānā viṣolbaṇāḥ |*  
*samāviśanti marmāṇi neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.119.65||*  
*arjunasya ime bāṇā neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ*  
*kṛntanti mama gātrāṇi māghamāṃ segavā iva ||6.119.66||*  
*sarve hy api na me duḥkhaṃ kuryur anye narādhipāḥ |*  
*vīraṃ gaṇḍīvadhanvānam ṛte jiṣṇuṃ kapidhvajam ||6.119.67||<sup>36</sup>*

<sup>35</sup> Added by myself, as this sequence was not translated by Cherniak.

<sup>36</sup> We quote here the edition followed by Cherniak, which corresponds to the following excerpt in the BORI edition (the arrangement of the verses differs significantly, which is why we have chosen to present the text from the edition followed by the translator we are quoting, avoiding any major change to this translation):

*vajrāśanisamasparśāḥ śitāgrāḥ saṃpraveśitāḥ |*  
*vimuktā avyavacchinnā neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.114.55||*  
*nikṛntamānā marmāṇi dṛḍhāvaraṇabhedinaḥ |*  
*musalānīva me ghnanti neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.114.56||*  
*brahmadāṇḍasamasparśā vajravegā durāsadāḥ |*  
*mama prāṇān ārujanti neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.114.57||*  
*bhujagā iva saṃkrudhā lelihānā viṣolbaṇāḥ |*  
*mamāviśanti marmāṇi neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.114.58||*  
*nāśayantīva me prāṇān yamadūtā ivāhitāḥ |*  
*gadāparighasaṃsparśā neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.114.59||*  
*kṛntanti mama gātrāṇi māghamāse gavām iva |*  
*arjunasya ime bāṇā neme bāṇāḥ śikhaṇḍinaḥ ||6.114.60||*  
*sarve hy api na me duḥkhaṃ kuryur anye narādhipāḥ |*  
*vīraṃ gaṇḍīvadhanvānam ṛte jiṣṇuṃ kapidhvajam ||6.114.61||*

61. These shafts, crashing like thunderbolts, have been released non-stop in battle by Arjuna. These arrows are not Śikhaṇḍin's.
62. These arrows, that tear through my strong armor and cut me to the quick, pounding my body, are not Śikhaṇḍin's.
63. These arrows, crashing and irresistible like impetuous thunderbolts, affecting my very breath of life, are not Śikhaṇḍin's.
64. These arrows, destroying my breath of life as if they were messengers sent by Yama, are not Śikhaṇḍin's; they smash home like maces and clubs.
65. These arrows, penetrating my vital organs like this, like raging and virulently poisonous snakes licking their tongues, are not Śikhaṇḍin's.
66. These are Arjuna's arrows, not Śikhaṇḍin's. They cut through my limbs just as newly born crabs cut through the mother crab.
67. Apart from monkey-bannered Jīṣṇu the wielder of the Gaṇḍīva bow, none of the other princes can inflict pain on me, even if they're all rolled into one. (trans. Cherniak, vol. 2, p. 487)

This last extract is enough to convince us that Śikhaṇḍin is not like other warriors because of his persistent femininity. To conclude this demonstration, we will now seek to understand why, according to the text, femininity hinders his full access to the martial sphere.

### 3.2.4 Femininity as an obstacle

First, let's consider how Ambā is described. When Śiva grants Ambā the opportunity to slay Bhīṣma, she explains why her femininity stands in the way of this vengeful plan:

*tataḥ sā punar evātha kanyā rudram uvāca ha |  
upapadyet katham deva striyo mama jayo yudhi |  
strībhāvena ca me gāḍhaṃ manaḥ śāntam umāpate || 5.188.9||*

The maiden said again to Rudra, 'How can it be that I, a woman, will triumph in battle, for since I am a woman, **my heart is meek to its core**, Consort of Uma'. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 520)

This stanza therefore indicates that it is because of her peaceful mind (*manaḥ śāntam*), which seems to be a characteristic of women, that Ambā cannot fight Bhīṣma. As a result, Śiva promises her rebirth as a man, which will enable her to fulfill her wish.

Previously, when Rāma Jāmadagnya had met her, he had perceived and described her as a delicate being for whom the life of an ascetic would be too arduous:

*pravrajyā hi suduḥkheyaṃ sukumāryā viśeṣataḥ |  
rājaputryāḥ prakṛtyā ca kumāryās tava bhāmini || 5.174.8 ||*

Wandering forth is **quite difficult**, especially for a **delicate woman** like you, a princess **by nature dainty**, radiant maiden (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 500)

If this delicacy linked to her nature as a princess would make asceticism too difficult to bear, it is obvious that the life of a warrior, with its share of physical and moral suffering, would be even more so. Further on, we learn that Ambā's nature arouses Rāma's compassion:

*tasyāś ca dr̥ṣtvā rūpaṃ ca vyaś cābhinavaṃ punaḥ |  
saukumāryaṃ paraṃ caiva rāmaś cintāparo 'bhavat || 5.176.28||*

*kim iyaṃ vakṣyatīty evaṃ vimṛśan bhr̥gusattamaḥ |  
iti dadhyau ciraṃ rāmaḥ kṛpayābhipariplutaḥ ||5.176.29||*

Studying her shape and fresh bloom and **very delicate features**, Rāma was sunk in thought. Thinking, ‘What is she going to say?’ the best of Bhṛguś, Rāma, mused for a long time, flooded with **compassion**.

Book 6 also mentions an emotion that Bhīṣma feels toward Śikhaṇḍin, which prevents him from attacking him:

*dhṛtarāṣṭra uvāca |  
katham āsaṃs tadā yodhā hīnā bhīṣmeṇa saṃjaya |  
balinā devakalpena gurvarthe brahmacāriṇā ||6.115.1||  
tadaiva nihatān manye kurūn anyāṃś ca pārthivān  
na prāharad yadā bhīṣmo ghr̥ṇitvād drupadātmaje ||6.115.2||*

Samjaya, what the state of my warriors, deprived of the powerful, god-like Bhīṣma, **who had taken a vow of chastity** for the sake of his father? Since Bhīṣma, **out of his abhorrence**, refused to strike the son of Drupada, I consider the Kurus and all the others to be already as good as slaughtered by the Pāṇḍavas. (trans. Cherniak, vol. 2, p. 501)

The term *ghṛṇitva*- here raises questions because *ghṛṇa*- can mean ‘despise’ or ‘disgust’ as it is translated in all the translations consulted<sup>37</sup>, but also ‘compassion’. We are tempted to incline to the second interpretation because of the occurrence of *kṛpā* in the above-mentioned stanza (5.176.29). In addition to the question of the emotions aroused by Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin (compassion, contempt, or abhorrence), which would pose a problem for her opponents on the battlefield, this latter occurrence reveals the main reason behind Bhīṣma's inability to fight a woman or someone who was once a woman and therefore retains a part of her femininity: his vow of chastity.

### 3.2.5 Analogy between fight and sexual intercourse

In Book 5, Bhīṣma had already mentioned the reason for this restrictive clause he imposed on himself in combat. As he introduces the troops present to Duryodhana, he provides details about one of the protagonists, our famous Śikhaṇḍin:

*arjunaṃ vāsudevaṃ ca ye cānye tatra pārthivāḥ |  
sarvān āvārayiṣyāmi yāvad drakṣyāmi bhārata ||5.169.15||  
pāñcālyam tu mahābāho nāhaṃ hanyāṃ śikhaṇḍinam |  
udyateṣuṃ abhipreṣya pratiyudhyantam āhave ||5.169.16||  
lokaḥ tad veda yad ahaṃ pituḥ priyacikīrṣayā  
prāptaṃ rājyaṃ parityajya brahmacārye dhṛtavrataḥ ||5.169.17||  
citrāṅgadaṃ kauravāṇāṃ ahaṃ rājye 'bhyaṣecayam  
vicitravīryam ca śiśuṃ yauvarājye 'bhyaṣecayam ||5.169.18||  
devavratatvaṃ vikhyāpya pṛthivyāṃ sarvarājasu  
naiva hanyāṃ striyaṃ jātu na strīpūrvam katham cana ||5.169.19||  
sa hi strīpūrvako rājañ śikhaṇḍī yadi te śrutaḥ |  
kanyā bhūtvā pumāñ jāto na yotsye tena bhārata ||5.169.20||  
sarvāṃs tv anyān haniṣyāmi pārthivān bharatarṣabha |  
yān sameṣyāmi samare na tu kuntīsutān nrpa ||5.169.21||*

<sup>37</sup> Buitenen: ‘disdain’ (vol. 3, p. 178).

15. Arjuna, Vāsudeva and the other kings there I shall all beat back as soon as I see them, Bhārata,
16. but I shall not, strong-armed king, kill Śikhaṇḍin of Pañcāla, when I see him march against me on the battlefield with arrows at the ready.
17. The world knows that in order to please my father, I relinquished the kingship that was mine, and **kept the vow of celibacy**,
18. I consecrated Citrāṅgada as king of the Kauravas and the child Vicitravīrya as Young King.
19. **Having proclaimed my title of Devavrata** among all kings on earth, I shall *not* kill a woman, or one who was a woman before.
20. For you may have heard that Śikhaṇḍin was once a woman, king. Born a girl, he later became a man. I shall not fight him.
21. All the other kings I shall kill, bull of the Bharatas, whomever I encounter in battle, except the sons of Kuntī, king. (trans. Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 492-3)

Further on (5.193.62), he utters similar words and specifies that he will not fight someone who bears a woman's name or who looks like a woman<sup>38</sup>. We can read in stanza 5.169.19 that Bhīṣma mentions his epithet Devavrata, then indicates that he will not fight a woman. Bhīṣma is called Devavrata 'devoted to the gods' because he made a specific vow of celibacy proclaimed to allow his father Śāntanu to marry Satyawatī. The use of the absolutive in the sequence *devavratatvaṃ vikhyāpya* 'having proclaimed my title of Devavrata' indicates that this process is prior to or contemporary with the main process. The cause-and-effect relationship is therefore not fully explicit, but the emphasis on the existence of this vow in 17 leaves no doubt, in our view, that Bhīṣma cannot fight a woman *because* of his vow of celibacy<sup>39</sup>. This vow of celibacy, which he mentions twice (17 and 19), therefore seems to include fighting against a woman, which is perceived as a form of sexual contact (structural equivalence). Here we see a clear analogy between combat, which can lead to death, and the sexual act. It should be noted that the sexual act and the act of war share several common features: physical proximity, impetuosity accompanied by a loss of control of the senses, but also the shedding of blood (in combat in one case and during the defloration of a woman in the other).

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have closely examined the martial dimension of the ambiguously gendered character Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin. We have seen that this epic figure shows clear signs of martiality, unusual for a female figure, or more accurately a partially female figure, in ancient India, apart from representations of wrathful deities: Ambā displays the anger and determination characteristic of a fierce warrior and clearly expresses her intense desire for revenge and the death of Bhīṣma; she is trained in archery, disguised as a man but still very much a woman; and she is present on the battlefield in the guise and name of Śikhaṇḍin, as a 'man-woman'.

While one might initially think that Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin is an example of female martiality, we have also detected signs of a profound incompatibility between femininity and warfare. First, we observe the fact that it seems impossible for a woman to fight, which leads Ambā to call on

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<sup>38</sup> According to M. Biarreau, this addition to the first statement could also refer to Arjuna, who disguised himself as a woman at the court of King Virāṭa (Biarreau, 2002/1: 1099-1103).

<sup>39</sup> Špicová also noted that the status as a *brahmacārin* of Bhīṣma is enhanced by the fact that he 'mentions his vows of renouncing his kingdom and of celibacy whenever he explains his not fighting against Śikhaṇḍin because of Śikhaṇḍin's (former) femininity' (2021: 309). We go further than this remark in this paper.

a third party, then to wish to change bodies in order to carry out her vindictive project. We also noticed that Śikhaṇḍin is not described in the same way as other warriors, with a marked scarcity of expressions using the verb, or derivatives of, *YUDH-* ‘to fight’. Furthermore, we found only one occurrence of a term derived from *vīra-* used to describe him, even though this is the most common qualifier in the epic (along with *yodha-*) to designate warrior heroes. Śikhaṇḍin's martial social status seems to be confined to that of a chariot-<warrior> (*ratha-*). Unlike a charioteer such as Kṛṣṇa, Śikhaṇḍin fights, but his arrows are inactive and even pleasant.

Femininity therefore seems to be an obstacle to full access to martiality, and we sought to find out why through a philological approach (narrative and lexical literary study). The text indicates that Ambā cannot succeed in combat because of her peaceful spirit and that she is also delicate for the ascetic life. This delicacy arouses compassion in Rāma Jamadāgnya, as well as in Bhīṣma, who refuses to fight this transgender being. But beyond the nature of women, which is said to be unsuited to combat, the real reason that makes femininity and martiality incompatible in this episode seems to us to be the fact that combat is analogous to a sexual act. Bhīṣma cannot therefore fight a woman or someone who was once a woman, or even someone who has the appearance of a woman, because of his vow of chastity.

This reason could be perceived as relating to the etiological nature of the episode which serves to explain how and why the invincible warrior Bhīṣma could have been defeated (Adhuri, 2016: 275-6). It should also be noted that the fight between Bhīṣma and Ambā-Śikhaṇḍin has a particular erotic aura this time for mytho-structural reasons. Indeed, as Brian Collins has pointed out (2023: 136-8), if the course of events had not been disrupted by the disorder inherent in the epic, Ambā should have been married to Bhīṣma (three wives for the three brothers)<sup>40</sup>.

But, the link between the martial and erotic realms is well known to indologists concerning sexual and warlike ardor with the metaphorical figure of the elephant in rut (see for example, Brocquet, 2009: 252-3) and other clues to this link have been uncovered in this study, inviting us to continue in this direction for future research: the fact that typically feminine anger in a romantic context has been transmuted into warrior anger, the isotopy of desire in the expression of Ambā's vindictive project, the martial path replacing marital life rendered impossible, and the fact that Śikhaṇḍin's arrows are almost a source of pleasure, recalling certain passages from the *Kāmasūtra*.

Regarding the anthropological theory ‘tested’ here, we note, like Testart, signs of an ontological incompatibility between femininity and martiality, and have uncovered a new explanatory hypothesis, not considered in his essay *L'Amazone et la cuisinière* which tries to explain the division of labor by an unconscious law of non-accumulation of blood. Our new hypothesis is formulated as follows: women cannot fight because fighting is analogous to a sexual act. Fighting a woman could therefore be considered rape and imply a form of stain, just like abduction (think of Śālva's speech when Ambā returns to him, but also the similar situation experienced by Sītā). Similarly, in this episode, we learn that asceticism is not recommended

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<sup>40</sup> This impossible love is also the subject of a fictional novel, *Amba and Bhishma: a love story that was never meant to be* by Ashok B. Banker (2013).

for women because they risk being ‘desired by kings’<sup>41</sup> if they go into the forest. Thus, women seem to be excluded from certain activities in order to maintain their sexual ‘purity’. Here, we do not reject Testart's hypothesis, which is not incompatible with our new hypothesis. But for now, we have sought, on an anthropological level, to open a new interpretative door by studying first-hand data and, on a philological level, to study the epic from an original angle, stimulated by anthropological studies.

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<sup>41</sup> *tatas tu te 'bruvan vākyaṃ brāhmaṇās tāṃ tapasvinīm |  
tvām ihaikākinīm dṛṣtvā nirjane gahane vane |*

*prārthayisyanti rājendrās tasmān maivaṃ manah kṛthāḥ ||5.174.10||*

Then the brahmins added to the [ascetic] girl, ‘When they see you living alone in the empty and dense woods, **kings will proposition you**, therefore do not set your mind on this.’ (trans. modified, Buitenen, vol. 3, p. 500)

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