

Liminal Spaces, and Identity Transformations  
in South Asian Literatures and Arts

Essays in Honour of  
Professor Alexander Dubyanskiy

Edited by Paola M. Rossi

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# Rudra's Involvement in Ambā's Liminal Ascetic Path

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## *Abstract*

The *Ambopākhyāna* is widely acknowledged as the most renowned case of liminality in the *Mahābhārata*, especially in terms of the narrative agency of female characters. Several scholars have examined it from diverse viewpoints, especially as concerns the Vedic background of the prototypical bond between Rudra and Ambā. With respect to such *status quaestionis*, this paper mainly focuses on the ambiguities arising from Ambā undertaking the ascetic path, given her status of unmarried woman. However, first and foremost, it inquires into the details of “how” she managed to be granted a very special boon by Rudra/Śiva. Hence, some tentative issues to further reconsider Ambā's character as an ascetic will be advanced, mainly via reconsideration of lexical choices in selected sets of *ślokas* in the *Ambopākhyāna*, and through comparison with another recipient of Śiva's boon, *i.e.* the *tapasvinī* Arundhatī.

*Keywords:* Rudra, Ambā, Ascetic, *tapasvinī*, *vrātya* culture, *strīdharmā*.

## 1. *Introduction\**

The story of Ambā has always been of great interest as a renowned *Mahābhārata* (MBh) case study of character liminality, related to both the topic of gender-

\* I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Tiziana Pontillo for her critical observations, and to Steve McComas for the English editing. A first draft of this paper was delivered at the Milan seminar under a different title (*A quête for vengeance. Rudra's involvement in Ambā's ascetic path and gender transition*). Unless otherwise stated, the translations are all mine.

bending and the idea of androgyny<sup>1</sup>. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many eminent scholars devoted considerable attention to this particular topic from various perspectives, all of which contributed to the construction of a general framework in which the narrative structure and literary interpretation of the *Ambopākhyānā* may be placed. Smith (1955) conducted one of the first comprehensive philological analyses of all the versions of Ambā's story, accounting for a tentative diachrony of the interpolations. From an anthropological and gender-related point of view, Doniger's 1980 pivotal work and Goldman (1993) focused primarily on the text's perception of the concept of both transsexualism and androgyny, also from a comparative perspective (Doniger 1999)<sup>2</sup>. Scheuer (1982) encompassed Ambā's story in his inquiry into Śiva's key role in the MBh, whereas Jamison (1996, 219) and Hildebeitel (2011, 362-83) hinted at the *Udyogaparvan* version of Ambā's story, in diachrony with Vedic texts.

Thus far, in terms of literary criticism, the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been as productive as the preceding decades. Brodbeck and Black's 2007 collective work on gender and narrative gathered many contributions regarding scholars' literary, textual and critical analysis of the *Ambopākhyānā* such as Custodi (2007, 208-229), who discussed the ambivalence of the binomial androgynes Arjuna / Bṛhannaḍā and Ambā / Śikhaṇḍin(ī). More recently, Adluri (2016), as regards MBh theology, conducted a philosophical analysis of Ambā's role as the divine androgyne<sup>3</sup>, whereas Chakravarti (2018), and Morales-Harley (2019) represent a fresh approach towards Ambā's narrative role and agency. Finally, Howard (2019, 232-235) focused, *inter alia*, on Ambā's *tapas*, acknowledging its often-overlooked details which the present paper proposes to amplify and corroborate.

By relying on such a background, I will focus primarily on selected lexical choices of *śloka*s from MBh 5. 187-188 in which the true scale of Ambā's *tapas* is

1. Ambā's status of being unmarried can be defined as ambiguous due to the development of her condition: she was kidnapped by Bhīṣma, together with her sisters – see Mani 1975, 27-29 for a detailed summary of Ambā's story – during the *svayaṃvara* (MBh 5. 170. 1-20); she then refuses to marry him because already in love with King Śālva, then flees (MBh 5. 171. 5-10); once she comes back to his beau, however, he rejects her since she now belongs Bhīṣma (MBh 5. 172. 1-5). Therefore, Ambā is not an ordinary maiden, but a woman whose social status is unlawful, because a) the *svayaṃvara* is technically unfulfilled; and b) Śālva's claim of being Ambā's righteous husband is, in fact, infringed by Bhīṣma's act of violence.

2. Along the same lines is Pattanaik's mention of Ambā, in his overview on Hindu tales about sexual transformation and gender metamorphosis (2002, 23-24).

3. Adluri 2016, 276: «the Ambā narrative – by evoking a constellation of themes central to the theology of the Goddess such as the divine androgyne [...] – is a vital element of the epic's philosophical architecture».

presented and her obtainment of a boon from Rudra as *vrataphala*, 'fruit of vow'. Then, I will briefly compare her ascetic experience to that of the *tapasvini* Arundhatī (MBh 9. 47), who was also granted a boon from Śiva.

## 2. *Ambā's Quête for Vengeance: Her Ascetic Path and Tapas*

After Rāma has repeatedly told Ambā that he cannot fulfil his promise to avenge her by killing Bhīṣma<sup>4</sup>, she decides to take the *quête* for vengeance upon herself:

*na cāham enaṃ yāsyāmi punar bhīṣmaṃ kathaṃ cana // 8 //*  
*gamīsyāmi tu tatrāhaṃ yatra bhīṣmaṃ tapodhana /*  
*samare pātayīsyāmi svayam eva bhṛḡūdvaḥa // 9 //*  
*evam uktvā yayau kanyā roṣavyākulalocanā /*  
*tapase dhṛtasamkalpā mama cintayatī vadham // 10 // MBh 5. 187. 8c-10 //*

"[...] and I won't go back again to Bhīṣma in any way. But I will go there where I myself can cause Bhīṣma to fall in war, o great ascetic, offspring of Bhṛḡu!" After speaking thus, the virgin whose eyes were full of wrath, went away, firmly resolute on *tapas*, planning my death in her mind.

Here, I propose an alternative translation of the compound *dhṛtasamkalpa* with the dative *tapase*. First of all, I have chosen to stick to Hara's definition (1998, 634) of *tapas* as a «power-substance [...] stored up within the bodies of ascetics in the course of the practice of severe bodily mortification», and to not translate *tapas* itself as 'austerities'. In fact, I believe that Ambā, at that very moment, decided to resort to asceticism already making its consequences her goal. The compound occurs twice in the MBh in a context of war, conveying the idea of a firm resolution to achieve a goal perceived as ineluctable<sup>5</sup>. Van Buitenen (1978, 518) translated it as, 'she set her mind on austerities'. However, in order to highlight Ambā's

4. See Brockington 1998, 285; 463, and Thomas 1996, 66-69 as concerns Rāma Paraśurāma's championing of Ambā and his intervention in other events.

5. In MBh 5. 151. 27 there is a reference to the Pāṇḍavas: *tatas te dhṛtasamkalpā yuddhāya sahasainikāḥ / pāṇḍaveyā mahārāja tām rātriṃ sukhān āvasan // 27 //* 'Thereupon the Pāṇḍaveyas, having firmly resolved upon war, great king, passed the night comfortably with their troops' (van Buitenen 1978, 468; tr. slightly modified). And in MBh 9. 11. 37, which refers to Kaurava legions entering the battlefield under the command of Droṇa's son: *vijaye dhṛtasamkalpāḥ samabhīyaktajīvitāḥ / prāvīśaṃs tāvakā rājan haṃsā iva mahat saraḥ // 37 //* 'Your [troops] threw [themselves on the battlefield] firmly resolute on victory, wholly renouncing their life, like geese in a large lake'.



«unstoppable force»<sup>6</sup>, I propose instead to render it markedly different following the semantic meaning of the root *saṃ-√kṛp* ‘to fix, settle, determine’. Moreover, she is presented as intensely enraged; her eyes are *roṣavyākula*, ‘full of wrath’, due to Rāma breaking his promise. In actual fact, such seemingly casual hints at her rage are instead poignant: to be consistent with Hara’s definition, anger should diminish her *tapas*, because it is «most responsible for the loss of *tapas* [...] [and] is called the enemy of the *tapas*» (1977, 156). Indeed, if one does not subdue anger, one is easily subject to the dispersal of energy. However, surprisingly her *tapas* will, on the contrary, be increased instead of being discharged. Interestingly, the critical apparatus reports the *varia lectio* only attested in K<sub>2</sub> a Northern manuscript<sup>7</sup> – *vyākulacetanā* ‘[whose] consciousness is full of [wrath]’, which is representative of an even more deeply-rooted negative mindset that, *a fortiori*, should have caused a great discharge of *tapas*.

Afterwards, Bhīṣma became frightened<sup>8</sup> of Ambā, who was steadfastly employing extreme practices of mortification with the aim of gaining *tapas*, in order to bring about his death:

*yadaiva hi vanam prāyāt kanyā sā tapase dhṛtā /  
tadaiva vyathito dīno gatacetā ivābhavam // 14 //  
na hi mām kṣatriyaḥ kaś cid vīryeṇa vijayed yudhi /  
ṛte brahmaidas tāta tapasā saṃśītavratāt // 15 // MBh 5. 187. 14-15 //*

When indeed that virgin, firmly resolute upon ascetic heat, moved to the forest, then indeed I became troubled, afflicted, nearly bereft of sense. Because no Kṣatriya could ever defeat me in battle by strength, besides the one who knows the Brahman, dear, whose vow has been sharpened by ascetic heat.

What is most noteworthy is that Bhīṣma refers to Ambā as *brahmaivid*, a Brahman-knower whose vow has been *saṃśīta*, sharpened by *tapas*. In their survey of the usage of this compound in Vedic and *Sutta Pīṭaka* sources, Neri–Pontillo (2014

6. Howard 2019, 233; *ibid.*: «She engages in her austerities — not to achieve ultimate spiritual or marital bliss — but to bring down the icon of patriarchal structures. Her determination shakes even the heart of Bhīṣma, who was not shaken by any mighty forces, including those of his Guru who subdued generations of kṣatriyas».

7. See Adluri–Bagchee 2018, 245-258.

8. See Howard 2019, 233: «Perhaps he (= Bhīṣma) is disturbed by Ambā’s austerities because she is a woman and a woman who is neither married nor unmarried. The Patriarch no doubt feels threatened by the fact that Ambā’s motivation for *tapas* is not to find a good husband but to gain the power to slay him».

[2015], 176) showed how the epithet «may be a specific form of knowledge pointing at direct perception of the *brāhman* and of the gods, *i.e.* at achieving divine status». This is indicative of how Ambā's ascetic practices are quite advanced and are directed at achieving a specific goal. It should also be pointed out that the critical apparatus reports that K<sub>2</sub> reads *bhuvīn* in place of *yudhi*, which reveals that even more power is concerned, if she could succeed in decisively annihilating Bhīṣma, whom no Kṣatriya on earth could ever defeat. As concerns epic usage, instead, *brahmavid* is attested in 6. 27. 20<sup>9</sup>, where it describes the characteristics of those who pursue the *brahman*, within the wider context of the fifth *adhya*ya of the *Bhagavadgītā* and more generally refers to prominent characters, such as the *purohita* Dhaumya (2. 69. 9). More importantly, in two *loci* it is an epithet of Droṇa (1. 221. 9 and 7. 5. 17), who, along with Bhīṣma, could be representative of the aftermath of *vrātya* culture<sup>10</sup>.

Furthermore, the *bahuvrīhi* compound *saṃsītavrata* with the instrumental *tapasā*, is found in the MBh in two other instances: the first is found in the so-called *Kāmagītā* of *Āśvamedhikaparvan*, a didactic tale told by Kṛṣṇa to Yudhiṣṭhira<sup>11</sup>, in which Kāma affirms that no one can suppress desire, *i.e.* destroy himself, not even one whose vow has been sharpened by *tapas*<sup>12</sup>. However, it is significant, in my opinion, that the second instance occurs in an excised interpolation (App. 1, no. 55) of an older version of Ambā's story in *Ādīparvan*. Smith, who extensively discussed and analysed this interpolation<sup>13</sup>, recognises it as «the original version from which the longer ones (in V 187-188) develop»<sup>14</sup>, due to the presence of Skanda in place of Śiva<sup>15</sup>. Skanda gives Ambā a *sraja*, a magic 'garland' that, if worn, bestows the power to kill Bhīṣma. Then, she asks Drupada for help, giving

9. MBh 6. 27. 20: *na prahṣyeyet priyaṃ prāpya nodvijet prāpya cāpriyaṃ / sthīrabuddhir asaṃmūḍho brahmavid brahmaṇi sthitaḥ // 20 //* 'May he not rejoice after reaching the desired [= good], nor may he tremble after reaching the undesired [= evil], the one who has a solid intelligence, the one who is not confused, the one who knows the Brahman, stands in the Brahman'. On this matter see Brockington 1998, 273, as regards the Brahman being exalted «as both the goal of Yoga and as an external agency».

10. I refer to Pontillo 2016, 205, where she calls them «*vrātya*-seniors».

11. Agarwal 2002, 204.

12. MBh 14. 13. 16: *yo mām prayatate hantuṃ tapasā saṃsītavrataḥ / tatas tapasī tasyātha punaḥ prādurbhavāmy aham // 16 //* 'The one whose vow is sharpened by ascetic heat, who should try to kill me, indeed I shall become manifest again in his ascetic heat'.

13. Smith 1955, 108-125.

14. *Ibid.*, 121.

15. See also Scheuer 1982, 139, n. 20.

him the garland, and at his refusal<sup>16</sup>, she runs away leaving him with the unwanted token. In the *pāda*, Ambā is categorised as *vyudastām sarvalokeṣu*, ‘dispersed among people’, and *tapasā samśītavratām*, ‘whose vow is sharpened by *tapas*’ (App. 1, no. 55. 91).

Which brings us to the first round of Ambā’s ascetic experience recounted a few *ślokas* later in the text after Bhīṣma has expressed his concern over it:

*sā tu kanyā mahārāja pravīśyāśramamaṅḍalam /  
yamunātīram āśrītya tapas tepe ’timānuṣam // 18 //*  
*nirāhārā kṛṣā rūkṣā jaṭilā malapaṅkinī /  
ṣaṇ māsān vāyubhakṣā ca sthāṇubhūtā tapodhanā // 19 //*  
*yamunātīram āśāḍya saṃvatsaram athāparam /  
udavāsaṃ nirāhārā pārayām āsa bhāminī // 20 //*  
*śīrṇaparṇena caikena pārayām āsa cāparam /  
saṃvatsaraṃ tīvrakopā pādāṅguṣṭhāgradhiṣṭhitā // 21 //*  
*evaṃ dvādaśa varṣāṇi tāpayām āsa rodasī /  
nīvartyamānāpi tu sā jñātībhir naiva śakyate // 22 // MBh 5. 187. 18-22 //*

Great king, the virgin after entering into a territory of hermitages and seeking refuge on the bank of the Yamunā, built up divine ascetic energy. Abstaining from food, emaciated, soiled, [her hair] twisted together, covered with dust and mire, and for six months eating [only] air, [she] became an ascetic rich in ascetic heat<sup>17</sup> immovable [as a tree trunk]. Remaining seated near the bank of the Yamunā, that shining woman withstood another full year of no food and [having] the water as [her] house. And moreover, she survived another full year on a single withered leaf, boiled with intense [anger] while standing on the tips of her big toes. She generated ascetic heat in this way for twelve years turning it toward heaven and earth and she could not be dissuaded from it even by [her] relatives.

An often-overlooked detail is the fact that her ascetic practices consisting in *nirāhāra* ‘fasting’<sup>18</sup>, and *vāyubhakṣa* ‘feeding off air’ are exceptionally qualified as *atimānuṣa*, ‘superhuman’ or ‘divine’. In fact, the adjective is mostly employed in the MBh to qualify deeds of various entities, but never once does it refer to ascetic

16. See Smith 1955, 122: «There seems to be some confusion in the poet’s mind as to whether the garland is a bribe, a bond [...] or talisman. [...] it lays an obligation without any guarantee of success and the *kṣatriyas* and Drupada seem chary of it for that reason».

17. The critical apparatus registers *tapasvīnī* as *varīa lectio* read in K<sub>4</sub>, D<sub>3</sub>, D<sub>4</sub> and M1.2.

18. Baldissera (2018, 75-78) recently surveyed the ascetic practice of food abstention in the epic.

practices<sup>19</sup>. Once again it is also noted that she manages to not discharge energy, despite being *tīvrakopā*, 'boiling with intense anger'. For the second time, the text hints at her being powerfully enraged, yet her ascetic energy is actually widening instead of narrowing. Moreover, it is noteworthy that even her *jñāti* 'relatives' could not dissuade her, a sign that her ascetic practices may have truly reached a stage in which she has detached herself from earthly bonds.

She ultimately became a *tapodhanā*, '[woman] rich in *tapas*', an epithet which occurs 7 times in the feminine, referring to the goddess Umā (MBh 13. 129. 38), Kuntī (MBh 1. 148. 2), Draupadī (App. 1, no. 95. 68)<sup>20</sup> as well as Yayāti's daughter, Mādhavī (MBh 5. 119. 21 and App. 1, no. 52. 7-8)<sup>21</sup>, who both obtained the boon of renewable virginity<sup>22</sup>. The last occurrence is registered in MBh 13. 134. 47, where Gaṅgā calls *tapodhanā* an ideal woman who fulfils her own *strīdharmā*. One might wonder about the reason for employing such an epithet to describe a woman who does not comply with her *strīdharmā* at all. Indeed, Ambā's role has been consistently analysed in comparison with other women – at her character's expense – under the paradigm of extreme gender role polarisation<sup>23</sup>, but if nowhere does the text judge her autonomy harshly, why do we? Instead, she paved her own way, as a woman unencumbered by *strīdharmā*<sup>24</sup>, and lexical references are indeed indicative of the respect she earned, if not within the story, at least in the eyes or in the intentions of the narrator<sup>25</sup>.

In this regard, it is possible to establish a parallel with the story Indra tells Bhadravāja's daughter Srucāvati – who practised *tapas* in order to conquer Indra's love

19. The adjective occurs 28 times throughout the text qualifying mainly exploits (630\*. 1 after 1. 68. 7; 1. 68. 9; 94. 25; 96. 46; 109. 4; 1214\*. 3 after 1. 114. 24ab; 152. 11; 3. 12. 2; 231. 17; 254. 10; 4. 32. 18; 7. 40. 3; 73. 36; 43; 113. 24; 8. 32. 35; 9. 11. 20); appearance (1. 142. 1); tales (3. 98. 2); valour (4. 32. 36; 12. 29. 122); thrills (5. 8. 9); common (13. 5. 8) and superhuman behaviour (7. 88. 8; 14. 8. 32); the Adhyātma (12. 238. 20); beings (12. 245. 2), and the basics of daily life (14. 86. 20).

20. MBh App. 1, no. 95. 68: *nityakālam̐ subhikṣās te pāñcālās tu tapodhane // 68 //* 'And now, woman rich in ascetic heat, the Pāñcālās have constantly abundant supplies'.

21. MBh 5. 119. 21: *etasmīn antare caiva mādhavī sā tapodhanā / mṛgacarmaparītāngī paridhāya mṛgatvacam // 21 //* 'And in that place, Mādhavī the rich in ascetic heat, after having worn a deer's skin, moved in a circle with her limbs covered in deer [skin]'.

22. See Brodbeck 2009, 169, n. 10.

23. I am referring to what Dasgupta 2000, 54 stated, by analysing parallelisms between the dynamics of Ambā and Mādhavī's literary role, from which emerges an overall discouraging assessment: «both are tools for male ambitions».

24. Howard 2019, 34.

25. Smith 1955, 160-161 acknowledges the author's originality in his sympathetic approach to Ambā's character.

– of how Arundhatī obtained a boon from Śiva, within the broader frame of Balarāma’s arrival at the sacred *tīrtha* Badarapācana<sup>26</sup>.

[*bhagavān haraḥ* [...] *’bravīt*]  
*bhavadbhir himavatpṛṣṭhe yat tapaḥ samupārjītam /*  
*asyāś ca yat tapo viprā na samaṃ tan mataṃ mama // 41 //*  
*anayā hī tapasvīnyā tapas taptam suduścaram /*  
*anaśnantyā pacantyā ca samā dvādaśa pāritāḥ // 42 //*  
*tataḥ provāca bhagavāms tām evārundhatīm punaḥ /*  
*varam vṛṇīṣva kalyāni yat te ’bhilaṣitam hṛdi //43 // MBh 9. 47. 41-43 //*

[The Divine Destroyer [...] said:] “The ascetic heat acquired by you at the top of the Mountain, is not equal to her ascetic heat, o sages, this is my opinion. Indeed, from this ascetic (woman) was generated an inaccessible ascetic heat, twelve years were endured by cooking without eating”. Then the Divine spoke again to Arundhatī: “Virtuous woman, choose for yourself the boon which is desired in [your] heart”.

If we look at both passages, we see that both women endure harsh penances for the same period of time, that is *dvādaśa*, ‘twelve years’ (5. 187. 22; 9. 47. 42) and Śiva acknowledges that Arundhatī’s *tapas* is indeed *suduścara*, a formulaic adjective for describing exceptional *tapas*, inaccessible to most, the meaning of which is ‘very arduous’ or, in Hara’s (1998) translation, ‘hard to practice’<sup>27</sup>. We have already mentioned that anger is an enemy of *tapas*, whereas patience and endurance are its activators<sup>28</sup>, thus, Arundhatī’s mindset towards ascetic practices is consistent with the model *tapasvin(ī)* who does not yield to anger, in contrast with Ambā. Nonetheless, Śiva had previously acknowledged Arundhatī’s patience in enduring

26. On the matter see Hildebeitel 2016, 76-77 and Száler 2017, 334-335. Note also that Srucāvati is referred to in the same way as Ambā, *i.e. dhṛtavratā* ‘[whose] vows are firm’, denoting the devotion the woman puts into her ascetic path (9. 47. 1-2). However, Ambā’s *tapas* is considered *jihma*, ‘dishonest’ (5. 187. 33), and is directed towards revenge, whereas Srucāvati’s *tapas* is blessed by Indra and directed towards conquering the god’s love due to which she consequently obtains *svarga* – cf. Sutton 2000, 86 and Brodbeck 2009, 44, n. 10.

27. For a survey of some MBh occurrences of the adjective, with respect to practical aspects of *tapas*, cf. Hara 1998, 636. Furthermore, it seems that in the MBh it often characterises the *tapas* of deities such as Viśvarūpa (5. 9. 6), the Supreme One Puruṣa (12. 331. 47), Danu (13. 19. 20), Aditī (13. 82. 25); and *ṣṣ* such as Bāladhi (3. 136. 4), Uttāṅka (3. 192. 9); or other beings such as cows (13. 78. 1). It also occurs as an attribute of purificatory acts (5. 9. 31).

28. Hara 1977, 158.

twelve years of generating ascetic heat under proper *niyama*, '[self-]control'<sup>29</sup>. From the comparison, one can see how Ambā not only endured worse penances for the same period of time, but also, that she is entitled to amass the same amount of, and even more *tapas* despite her susceptibility to anger.

Furthermore, Ambā's sworn revenge is highly feared by Gaṅgā who is indeed concerned for her son's fate. The goddess is determined to dissuade Ambā from her goal of gaining even more ascetic merits, which could indeed cause Bhīṣma's defeat<sup>30</sup>.

*sainām athābravīd rājan kṛtāñjalir aninditā /*  
*bhīṣmo rāmeṇa samare na jitaś cārulocane // 30 //*  
*ko 'nyas tam utsahej jetum udyateṣuṃ mahīpatim /*  
*sāhaṃ bhīṣmavināśāya tapas tapsye sudāruṇam // 31 //*  
*carāmi pṛthivīm devi yathā hanyām ahaṃ nṛpam /*  
*etad vrataphalaṃ dehe parasmin syād yathā hi me // 32 // MBh 5. 187. 30-32 //*

King, then, that irreproachable [girl] replied, showing respect: "Beautiful-eyed one, Bhīṣma was not defeated by Rāma in combat, who could ever have [enough] power to defeat that earth-lord whose arrows [are always] ready? I will manage to generate a very dreadful ascetic energy [fit to realise] Bhīṣma's annihilation. Goddess (= Gaṅgā), I walk the earth. Thus, I myself could slay the king! May this indeed be the fruit of my vow in another body!"

The cognate construction *tapas tap-* is matched with *sudāruṇa* 'dreadful', which is consistently attested mainly in contexts of war where in 30 instances it occurs as an attribute of *yuddha*, but it can also be found in reference to prominent characters, and as an attribute of events and wonders, etc.<sup>31</sup>. Remarkably, this adjective

29. See MBh 9. 47. 32a: *arundhatīm tato dṛṣṭvā tīvraṃ niyamam āsthitām* / 'Then, having seen Arundhatī undertaking severe [self-]control [...]'; and MBh 9. 47. 39c: *pṛito 'smi tava dharmajñe tapasā niyamena ca* / 'Law-knowing (woman) I am pleased with your ascetic heat and your [self-] control'.

30. See Howard 2019, 235-236: «Ambā knows that [...] she will have to take another birth because her female body prevents her from going to battle with the mighty warrior. Although her feminine gender [...] is constant, Ambā's biological sex is transformed and used as an instrument for her revenge. [...] Ambā's intense tapas becomes threatening. Bhīṣma, his mother Gaṅgā, ascetics, and gods all grow wary of the power of Ambā's tapas».

31. As an attribute of: a) general kinds of conflict (MBh 3. 12. 54; 6. 117. 29; 7. 23. 19; 35. 14; 64. 31; 94. 7; 107. 5; hand-to-hand combat in MBh 3. 154. 42; military array in MBh 6. 83. 17); b) despicable people and demons (MBh 1. 56. 18; 3. 43. 6; 264. 73; 7. 48. 47; 8. 49. 31; 12. 110. 7; 149. 96; 228. 5; 290. 42); c) prominent characters (Dhundhu in MBh 3. 193. 16; Lakṣmaṇa in MBh 3.

also occurs twice as an attribute of *māyā*, ‘extraordinary supernatural power’; in one instance, it is ascribed to the Dānavas, feared by Arjuna (MBh 3. 168. 24), and in the other, it characterises the magic conjured up by Bhīma’s son, Ghaṭotkaca (MBh 6. 90. 39). In addition, it is even employed to describe Śiva’s *tejas* (MBh 12. 274. 5), but to the best of my knowledge, it appears only twice as an attribute of a particular type of formidable *tapas*. The first instance is found in the *Nārāṇīyaparvan* (MBh 12. 321-339), acknowledged, on the one hand, as containing a high number of Vedic references (Brockington 1998, 13), on the other, as one of the sources in which Pāñcarātra’s earliest ideas on creation theory can be found (Misawa 2016), and it is also often linked to Epic Sāṃkhya cosmology (Brockington 1999; Adluri 2016, 293-300)<sup>32</sup>. Here, Vaiśampāyana tells Janamejaya that the gods underwent dreadful *tapas* which is *brahmoktaṃ* and *vedakalpitam*:

[*brahmaṇā sārddham ṛṣayo vibudhās*]  
*te tapaḥ samupātiṣṭhan brahmoktaṃ vedakalpitam /*  
*sa mahāniyamo nāma tapaścaryā sudāruṇā // 40 //*  
*ūrdhvaṃ dṛṣṭir bāhavaś ca ekāgraṃ ca mano ’bhavat /*  
*ekapādasthitāḥ samyak kāṣṭhabhūtāḥ samāhitāḥ // 41 // MBh 12. 327. 40-41 //*

The *ṛṣis* and the gods, along with Brahmā, approached the *tapas* revealed by Brahmā and regulated by the Vedas. This dreadful *tapas* practise is called Mahāniyama, *i.e.* great [self-]control. The *manas* stayed fixing [the focus] on one point, [while they stayed] with [their] sight and [their] arms upwards, at the

271. 23; Droṇa in MBh 7. 13. 8; Jamadagni’s grandson in MBh 12. 49. 29); d) Agni (MBh 4. 59. 21); e) extraordinary – both positive and negative – happenings (MBh 5. 141. 5; 6. 61. 9; 7. 6. 29; 166. 26; 8. 26. 38; 9. 22. 20; 23. 16. 3. 20); f) and general actions (MBh 12. 286. 28; 13. 9. 10); g) weapons (MBh 6. 78. 31; 6. 98. 20; 7. 73. 18; 7. 90. 20; 7. 141. 5; 29; 8. 38. 37; 9. 13. 22; 9. 22. 88); h) emotions (MBh 3. 247. 39; 5. 20. 10; 6. 81. 34; 7. 120. 84; 154. 2; 9. 28. 74; 13. 61. 24; 118. 12); i) tales and speech-related terms (MBh 1. 2. 61; 1. 46. 24; 3. 188. 84; 189. 6; 5. 58. 16; 6. 99. 41; 5. 104. 6); j) time (MBh 1742\*. 3 after 1. 163. 15; 9. 47. 37; 9. 21. 43); k) sounds (MBh 7. 73. 16; 9. 23. 13; 10. 1. 27); l) sacrifices and *sattraś* (MBh 1. 48. 2; 9. 40. 13); m) physical appearance (MBh 8. 51. 102; 9. 55. 12); n) places (MBh 2. 22. 33; 18. 2. 44); o) human-body related (MBh 8. 36. 31; 10. 8. 21); p) conduct (MBh 6. 80. 47; 12. 254. 44); q) animals (MBh 12. 273. 3; 4). It also occurs once as an attribute of *adharmā* (MBh 12. 149. 37), and of the earth (MBh 7. 40. 19).

32. See Adluri 2016, 293, as concerns elements of Sāṃkhya’s cosmology within the Nārāyaṇīya, which he links to Ambā’s status of divine androgyne: «In the Nārāyaṇīya, the text refers to the seven Citraśikhaṇḍins, who compose the seven prakṛtis [...] the names of these “colorful sages” recalls the name of Ambā upon her rebirth as a man, and in Sāṃkhya cosmology animating Prakṛti is the name for the female principle, the complement of Puruṣa. Further, in later theistic traditions, the Goddess is identified precisely with animating Prakṛti».

same time [they] stood on one foot being like wood, [having their thoughts] collected<sup>33</sup>.

It is noteworthy how, as mentioned above in MBh 5. 187. 18-22, Ambā seems to mirror divine ascetic practices; the gods stayed *ekapāda*, 'on one foot', while she managed to stay *pādānguṣṭhāgra*, 'on the tips of her big toes'. Both of them equally share the ability to stand still like wood or a tree trunk, which is expressed by a similar compounded *upamā*, e.g. *kāṣṭhabhūtāḥ* (MBh 12. 327. 41) and *sthāṇubhūtā* (MBh 5. 187. 19). The second instance, instead, is part of a much broader sequence of *adhyāyas* (113-116), which focus on Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma's dialogue about *ahīṃsā* and food abstention<sup>34</sup>.

*yas tu varṣātaṃ pūrṇaṃ tapas tapyet sudāruṇam /*  
*yaś caikaṃ varjāyen māṃsaṃ samam etan mataṃ mama // MBh 13. 116. 59 //*

The one who would undergo dreadful austerity for a full hundred years and the one who would shun flesh in my opinion are the same. (Chapple 1996, 120)

In particular, the stanza stresses how the merits of abstaining from meat are the same as the ones that come from generating *tapas*, no matter how dreadful this might be.

The last observation on the *śloka*s under discussion here concerns the fact that when Ambā is reincarnated as Śikhāṇḍin(ī), she remains unaware of her promised *vrataphala*, something characterised by Smith (1955, 126) as being indicative of «a fairly late [...] insertion into the epic», whereas Adluri (2016) observes that her apparent loss of memory is a function of Ambā's divine ambivalence and considers this incognisance ontological<sup>35</sup>. It is plausible to assume that the author may have intentionally depicted Ambā as being confident that she will benefit from the

33. According to the *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, the term *samāhita* literally means 'put or held together', but also 'one who has collected his thoughts or is fixed in abstract meditation', therefore 'steadfast'.

34. On the matter see Chapple 1996's translation and comment; Brockington 1998, 225; Sutton 2000, 310, and more recently Hildebeitel 2016, 29.

35. Adluri 2016, 278: «Śiva's promise does not contain a simple promise of memory of her former identity as a woman, that is, ontic memory, but rather, ultimately of memory of her true identity, that is, of her role in the Creation as the Goddess. This is ontological memory in contrast to ontic memory: that she will "remember" to bring down the Brahmā figure Bhīṣma. From Ambā's perspective, she will remember that she is not a hapless princess but the divine androgyne; from Śikhāṇḍin's perspective, she will remember to become the divine androgyne».



fruits of her ascetic practices, leading to a successful outcome, *paramin dehe*, ‘in another body’ (MBh 5. 187. 32), which finally brings us to what the true fulfilment of her *vrataphala* is – the triggering of Rudra’s theophany.

### 3. Rudra / Śiva’s Theophany

Before Rudra’s apparition, Ambā endured the last series of mortifications, and the first *tapas* she gained produces a *phala* Gaṅgā’s curse has meddled with<sup>36</sup>. From the point of view of literary criticism, scholars have dealt with the passage in different ways. On the one hand, Smith (1955, 148-149) observed that this section is an addition, as opposed to the older version told in App. 1, no. 55, with a new twist – which would have served to cast Ambā in a negative light – which he attributes to local legend. On the other, Adluri (2016, 310) reads the curse of being half a girl, half a river as the most meaningful hint at her being the *ardhanārī*, the divine androgyne indeed, whereas Howard (2019, 236) does not dwell directly on it. On the basis of the interpretation I am proposing, I consider this ultimate curse as proof that Ambā’s *tapas* is, in fact, so powerful that Gaṅgā has to take action against it. This is demonstrated by the fact that Ambā’s ascetic merits have drawn the attention of Rudra, who appears to her as himself, granting her the well-known boon of becoming a man in her next life. Significantly, the author increases the expectation of Rudra’s manifestation by not mentioning his name directly until after he has appeared. Instead, there is a build-up to a climax by first the employment of a kenning and an epithet (7a) after which, two *pādas* later, the god is finally addressed by name (9a).

*tāṃ devo darśayām āsa śūlapāṇīr umāpatīḥ /  
madhye teṣāṃ maharṣīṇāṃ svena rūpeṇa bhāminīm // 7 //*

36. MBh 5. 187. 37-40: *kadā cid aṣṭame māsi kadā cid daśame tathā / na prāśnītodakam api punaḥ sāvavarāṇīni // 37 // sāvatsabhūmiṃ kauravya tīrthalobhāt tatas tataḥ / patitā paridhāvanti punaḥ kāsīpateḥ sutā // 38 // sāvādī vatsabhūmyāṃ tu prathitāmbetī bhārata / vārṣikī grāhabahulā dustīrthā kuṣīlā tathā // 39 // sāvānyā tapasā tena bhāgārdhena vyajāyata / nadī ca rājan vatsesu kanyā caivābhavat tadā // 40 //* MBh 5. 187. 37-40 // ‘Sometimes for eight months, sometimes even for ten [months], that fair-skinned [girl] did not eat nor [drink] water. Kauravya, she [moved] by [her] eager desire for sacred places here and there the daughter of Kāśī’s lord fell again in Vatsabhūmi. Then, Bhārata, she transformed into a river in Vatsabhūmi known as Ambā, which has water only during the rains, abundant in rapacious animals, with bad fords and running in curved lines. King, because of [her] ascetic heat, the virgin then became a river in Vatsa, transformed [into a being] half river and half girl’.

*chandiyamānā vareṇātha sāvare matparājayam /  
vadhīṣyasīti tāṃ devaḥ pratyuvāca manasvinīm // 8 //  
tataḥ sāvare evātha kanyā rudram uvāca ha /  
upapadyet kathaṃ deva striyo mama jayo yudhi /  
strībhāvena ca me gāḍhaṃ manaḥ śāntam umāpate // 9 //  
[...] evam uktvā mahātejāḥ kapardī vṛṣabhadhvajaḥ /  
paśyatām eva viprāṇāṃ tatraivāntaradhīyata // 15 // MBh 5. 188. 7-9; 15 //*

The god who has a spear in hand, Umā's husband appeared with his own form to that shining woman in the midst of those great *Rṣīs*. Then, after being gratified with a boon, she picked out my defeat and the god spoke back to that [woman] of fixed mind: "You will slay [him]!". Then, the virgin said again to Rudra: "How could my victory in combat, *i.e.* a victory of a woman, be possible, o god? By means of womanhood, o consort of Umā, my will has plunged deeply into peace of mind. [...]" . Then, having spoken, Kapardin, the god full of splendour, whose emblem is a bull, disappeared there out of Brahmans' sight.

Here, I propose to look at two alternative lexical choices. The first one regards interpreting *manasvinī* in the sense of 'with the mind fixed' on something higher, and not 'spirited' as van Buitenen translated it, intentionally hinting at her reaction to the god's theophany. Secondly, Howard has already observed how she could have actually been successful in subduing her passion<sup>37</sup>, due to the fact that her intention of pursuing *tapas* is *dhṛta*. Such a consideration is also supported by the fact that it was previously stated that during her ascetic practices, she would not listen to anyone, not even to her relatives, showing that she had successfully overcome earthly bonds. However, as regards Śiva's role in granting a boon to Ambā, Smith (1955, 121) also acknowledges that Skanda's «supersession by Śiva means either he has moved down the pantheon, or the tale has become more pretentious or both». But in my opinion, there is a third alternative to be considered, and that is a plausible intention on the part of the author to rehabilitate Ambā's character as a powerful ascetic, *i.e.* her *tapas* became so powerful as to trigger the god's theophany as an instant *phala*. In fact, an antithesis can be established by comparing once again Ambā's and Arundhati's ascetic experiences, namely that Rudra

37. Howard 2019, 236: «it is the Sanskrit term *śānta* [...] that has been translated as "meek" and "still." Ambā presents herself not as a *śāntaḥ stri* (a peaceful woman) but a woman whose mind [...] is at peace [...]. Perhaps austerities have purified Ambā's body and brought peace to her heart, without diminishing her indomitable intent to bring about Bhīṣma's death for his unpardonable violation of her».

manifested himself *svena rūpeṇa*, ‘in his own form’, only before Ambā, but showed himself to Arundhatī *brāhma rūpaṃ kṛtvā*, ‘disguised as a brahmin’:

*arundhatīm tato dṛṣṭvā tīvraṃ niyamam āsthītām /  
athāgamat trīṇaṇaḥ supṛīto varadaś tadā // 32 //  
brāhmaṇ rūpaṃ tataḥ kṛtvā mahādevo mahāyāsāḥ /  
tām abhyety ābravīd devo bhikṣām icchāmy ahaṃ śubhe // 33 //*  
MBh 9. 47. 32-33 //

Then, after having seen Arundhatī performing severe [self-]control, the tree-eyed boon-giving, very pleased, went towards [her]. After the very glorious Mahādeva disguised himself as a brahmin, the god approached her and said: “Fair-one, I long for alms”.

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, I have attempted to demonstrate how the liminality of Ambā’s character drives her ascetic experience as regards her agency in following the ascetic path and her social role as a true ascetic. Firstly, Howard has already demonstrated that Ambā cannot be considered a victim<sup>38</sup>, therefore, on a textual level, I have endeavoured to show how the vocabulary employed is undeniably intended to portray Ambā as a powerful ascetic. Because she is alluded to as *brahmavid*, Brahman-knower, some considerations regarding her characterisation, apart from her condition as an unmarried woman, can certainly be conceded. As we have seen, the text employs an ambivalent lexicon in order to intersect and superimpose the conventional image of a rejected and unwanted maiden with and upon that of a powerful ascetic daring to perform a *tapas* which is indeed *atīmanuṣam* ‘divine’, *sudārunam* ‘dreadful’. There seems to be a prominent intention by the author to depict Ambā in terms of a powerful ascetic by echoing other passages referring to powerful *tapasvīns*, or even gods. This is consistent with what Smith (1955) demonstrated regarding the interpolations and the changes that the Ambā episode of the *Udyogaparvan* includes, as opposed to other mentions in the earliest *parvans*. Moreover, we have seen from frequent hints, e.g. MBh 5. 187. 10a and 187. 21b, her tangible wrath does not in any way prevent her from gaining *tapas*, while

38. Howard 2019, 242: «It is neither another account of the victimization of a woman entrapped by patriarchal customs nor a tale of scintillating gender themes».

conversely, several *tapasvinīs*, whose characters were analysed by Hara (1977) are commonly more prone to be hampered specifically by their anger. Her liminality as an ascetic drives her agency: not only does Ambā not discharge *tapas*, she even manages to amplify it.

Secondly, by comparing Ambā to Draupadī, Hildebeitel (2011, 496-497) underlines Ambā's status as an outcast woman, who is thereby penalised in her inability to fulfil her *dharma* as a wife and mother (Hildebeitel 2011, 380). However, in renouncing any return to her father's house or even to Bhīṣma's protection, she also renounces the fulfilment of her husband's *dharma*, to pursue an unconventional and unorthodox *dharma* which is all her own, or as Chakravarti (2018) stated, that her austerities are indeed «an attempt to return autonomy to a woman»<sup>39</sup>, even managing to effectively obtain merits. Thereby, her liminality also encompasses her social role; she renounces her “*strī*”-*dharma* to fulfil her “*svā*”-*dharma*.

Lastly, in reference to Rudra / Śiva's involvement and, above all, his theophany, I propose to view it from the standpoint of both a narrative and cultural reconstruction. In fact, the comparison with Arundhatī's story seems to show that Rudra's involvement in the path of female ascetics is being invoked as a consequence of obtaining a certain amount of *tapas*, however, only in Ambā's case was her *tapas* so powerful that it triggered Rudra's theophany *svena rūpeṇā*<sup>40</sup>. As Jamison (1996), Hildebeitel (2011) and, more extensively, Adluri (2016, 301) first hinted, there is more to Rudra's connection with the Ambā episode relating to a Vedic background, and – a far more daring hypothesis – a link to a *vrātya*-related one. Indeed, scholars have already demonstrated that there are hints in the *Udyogaparvan* which could trace back to a pre-orthodox socio-cultural context<sup>41</sup>. For example, the employment of the epithet *kapardīn* (MBh 5. 188. 15a) is common in depicting Rudra as a «divine model for a *vrātya* chief» (Parpola 2015, 25). Therefore, a parallel could be tentatively established with those particular passages from the *Ambopākhyāna* in further consideration of the general framework of cultural reconstruction of the ascetic warrior society. The lexical choices at hand seem

39. Chakravarti 2018, 174: «The austerities and ambivalent shifting sexuality leading to her transgendered history is a product of her attempt to reclaim some degree of autonomy in the battle over her reified body».

40. See Smith 1955, 158-159: «The substitution of Śiva for Skanda in Ambā's vision is also probably new. Skanda is but a pale figure against Śiva in classical times, and an interview with him would show about as much *tapas* as would compel a *yakṣa*: we want more».

41. I refer mainly to Brockington 1998, 155; 232-234; Harzer 2005, 163-178; Pontillo 2016, 205-246; and Vassilkov 2016, 181-204.

ultimately to allude to a typology of ascetic practice aimed at achieving a goal and not as an end in itself, and its occurrence in *loci* dealing with magic or referring to suspected *vrātya*-related characters hints at a broader framework of asceticism directed at reaching a god-like status (Pontillo 2016); her *tapas*, despite being cursed, forcefully unleashed the manifestation of Rudra's divine persona.

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