



AMBA'S STORY

'Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter'

(African proverb)

Until the Lions is a choreographic response to the tale of Amba/Shikhandi in the *Mahabharata*, the classical Sanskrit epic that has been beloved by Akram Khan since his childhood. Poet and writer Karthika Nair reimagines this story and those of other marginal characters from the original in her new book *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*. Nair's retelling in verse gives voice, dignity and intention to these female characters whose lives and stories, as well as their roles as catalysts and witnesses, have remained largely unexplored.

In the *Mahabharata*, Amba is the eldest daughter of the King of Kashi. At the point of choosing her husband during a public *swayamvara* ceremony, she is abducted by Bheeshma, son of the Kuru king. An unparalleled warrior and archer, he defeats Amba's potential suitors including her true and secret love, Shalva.

Bheeshma has made a vow of lifelong celibacy (Bheeshma means 'he of the terrible oath'). Intending Amba as a potential bride for his half-brother, Bheeshma discovers that Amba loves another. He releases her, but Shalva spurns her because she has been won by another man to whom she now belongs.

Amba returns to Bheeshma and insists he right the wrong done

to her by taking her as his bride. Bound by his vow of celibacy, Bheeshma refuses, and Amba's pleas for justice fall on deaf ears. Amba swears she will be revenged on Bheeshma and dedicates the rest of her life to this purpose.

She undergoes years of extreme penance, which unbalances the universe. Finally Lord Shiva appears and tells Amba she will destroy Bheeshma in her next life. Amba burns herself to death, and is reborn as Shikhandi, a woman later given male form by a forest spirit.

Trained as a warrior, burning with the memory of Amba's vow, Shikhandi finally confronts Bheeshma on the battlefield on the tenth day of an apocalyptic war between the Kaurava and Pandava clans. Recognising Shikhandi as female in origin, and as the instrument of Amba's revenge, Bheeshma lays down his weapon, allowing the warrior Arjuna to attack him from behind Shikhandi. Pierced by Shikhandi's arrows as well as Arjuna's, Bheeshma falls, severely wounded, and awaits his death and the war's end, on a bed of arrows.

Until the Lions, though, imagines this final confrontation as one between Shikhandi (fuelled by Amba's spirit and boon) and Bheeshma. The two tortured souls alone, with no other adversaries or allies: it becomes the culmination of two lifetimes of loyalty through betrayal, devotion through wrath.

On the night after the eighteenth and final day of war, Shikhandi is murdered by the three surviving warriors from the Kaurava army, who, in their desperate rage, break all the rules of battle, and kill him in his sleep, thus denying his soul a place in heaven.