

Precocious Women of the Great Indian Epic *Mahabharata*

Abstract

Mahabharata, one of the greatest Indian epics is often referred to as an example of righteousness and what happens between the good and the evil and the consequences. The *Mahabharata* is India's great mythological treatise on religion, philosophy, culture, spiritualism and dharma. Its greatness lays not only in its philosophical or the sacred element but also in the vastness of characters and stories of the epic. In the stories where the *Mahabharata* speaks of life, women occupy a central place. In living what life brings to them, the women of the *Mahabharata* show, that the truth in which one must live, is, however, not a simple thing; nor can there be any one absolute statement about it. Each one of them, in her own way, is a teacher to mankind as to what truth and goodness in their many dimensions are. When we consider the women in the *Mahabharata* and their treatment, it's important not to see them through the prism of Western feminism. This is a story set in an age and a place far removed from our own world. Different standards were valid in that age, and it wouldn't be fair to speak of "repression" and "subservience" in that context. However like other epics of the world, *Mahabharata* is also a hero oriented epic and the story is dominated by men. All the great heroes are male. And there are only a few women, whose roles are mainly that of wife and mother. Yet, they are very powerful in those roles. Women had active participation in the every situation of the epic and thus broke the notion of their subservient position. Some strong female figures changed the entire course of the epic and left a great impact on our mind. These women of *Mahabharata* were also the real victim of the war. An attempt has been made in this paper to study and critically analyze the roles played by the strong, powerful and precocious women in the epic. Three major women characters-----Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari have been taken into consideration. These three women play the leading roles in the epic. They enjoyed every part of a woman's life, as a daughter, wife, mother and friend. The plurality of their roles can be seen in the characters of Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Satvayati and Savitri. Some of the women characters in the epic were modern in their thinking and actions. They did not flinch ones before raising their voices against patriarchy Their status also highlight their importance in the social context. However in every imposed role they seem to struggle for their identity and survival.

Keywords: *Mahabharata*, Female Identity, Struggle, Patriarchy.

Introduction

Mahabharata, one of the greatest Indian epics is often referred to as an example of righteousness and what happens between the good and the evil and the consequences. The *Mahabharata* is India's great mythological treatise on religion, philosophy, culture, spiritualism and dharma. Its greatness lays not only in its philosophical or the sacred element but also in the vastness of characters and stories of the epic. In the stories where the *Mahabharata* speaks of life, women occupy a central place. In living what life brings to them, the women of the *Mahabharata* show, that the truth in which one must live, is, however, not a simple thing; nor can there be any one absolute statement about it. Each one of them, in her own way, is a teacher to mankind as to what truth and goodness in their many dimensions are. When we consider the women in the *Mahabharata* and their treatment, it's important not to see them through the prism of Western feminism. This is a story set in an age and a place far removed from our own world. Different standards were valid in that age, and it wouldn't be fair to speak of "repression" and "subservience" in that context. However like other epics of the world, *Mahabharata* is also a hero oriented epic and the story is dominated by men. All the great heroes are

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male. And there are only a few women, whose roles are mainly that of wife and mother. Yet, they are very powerful in those roles. Women had active participation in the every situation of the epic and thus broke the notion of their subservient position. Some strong female figures changed the entire course of the epic and left a great impact on our mind. These women of Mahabharata were also the real victim of the war. An attempt has been made in this paper to study and critically analyze the roles these women characters played by the strong, powerful and precocious women in the epic. Three major women characters-----Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari have been taken into consideration. These three women play the leading roles in the epic. They enjoyed every part of a woman's life, as a daughter, wife, mother and friend. The plurality of their roles can be seen in the characters of Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Satvayati and Savitri. Some of the women characters in the epic were modern in their thinking and actions. They did not flinch ones before raising their voices against patriarchy. Their status also highlight their importance in the social context. However in every imposed role they seem to struggle for their identity and survival.

Aim of the Study

The objective of the paper will be to study and critically analyze the roles these women characters played by the strong, powerful and precocious women in the epic.

"Kunti, Draupadi, and Gandhari are three of the most endearing women in Sanskrit literature. In spite of their faults and failings they exemplify the role of a traditional Hindu woman in an era of absolute male domination, and they exhibit a wide spectrum of qualities which rouse our administration for them" (Rajaram 15). Draupadi is considered as one of the most powerful and fascinating personalities in the Mahabharata. Every woman traditionally and primarily plays some fixed roles such as a daughter, as a wife and as a mother. But beyond these traditional roles, women of *Mahabharata* played some bold and excellent roles --- that of a special friend, a guide or an avenger. "The female characters who are most often portrayed as auditors are Gandhari and Draupadi, both of whom hear large portions of the texts while- at the side of their husband kings- fulfilling their function as queens" (Black 53). Draupadi's journey as a daughter was not a normal one. She was born out of fire despite the wish of her father. King Draupad demanded a boy not a girl and she was born for a specific purpose to destroy the Kauravas. She played an important role in the evolution of the main story of the epic. Since the major themes of *Mahabharata* are vengeance, love, duty, and sacrifice etc., it is evident from the epic that every character seems to struggle with destiny and notion of dharma. Draupadi's humiliation and disrespect aggravated the Pandavas to take revenge from Kauravas. The great war of Mahabharata was waiting for these warriors to show their anger for each other. Unlike mythological goddesses, Draupadi appears as a normal human being with pain, anger love and happiness. Like a struggling woman, she faces many challenges in her life but she maintains her dignity throughout the journey.

Draupadi's beauty was so magnetic that nobody could be saved from its charm. Her beauty attracted not only Arjuna but also other four Pandavas. That's why seeing the love in the eyes of all Pandavas Yudhishtira decided to share the beauty of Draupadi among five brothers as she had been taken as a winning property by Kunti and without seeing Draupadi she had ordered to share the prize among all Pandava brothers. Sometimes Draupadi also had to face a problem because of her beauty. Jayadharatha, the brother-in-law of Duryodhana, tried to molest her When they were residing in the forest during exile but she was intelligent enough to save her dignity and respect and took revenge from Jayadhartha. Pandavas made him their captive and cut his hair. Her beauty again became the problem in the court of king Virata when they were living in disguise. Sudeshna, wife of King Virata and sister of Kichaka was afraid that the king could be attracted by Draupadi's beauty. Kichaka tried to molest her but again her bravery and smartness helped her handle the situation and Pandavas killed Kichaka as desired by Draupadi. "A study of the Mahabharata reveals that Draupadi was one who could not tolerate a wrong anywhere and by anybody. The story of Kichaka is a case in point. When she was bent upon revenge, she did not care to what extent she was going to expose the family to danger. But a brave Kshatriya lady was certainly expected to behave that way" (Mani 76). During all her misfortunes her virtues kept her safe. Because of her virtues, she had earned special respect among her family members and relatives. Her mother-in-law loved her more than her sons. Her thirst for knowledge from her childhood enabled her to gain information from all sources like the teachers of her brother, learned guests who came to visit her father and from relatives; and after her marriage from her husbands, the learned Brahmanas and great sages who visited them not only in the kingdom but also in their forest life. In spite of the fact that she had never received any kind of formal education her power to grab knowledge and sharpen her memory made her famous as a learned (Bahusruta) and wise (Pandita) person. She could argue forcibly to win her point with apt quotations and illustrations because of her profound knowledge on various subjects like righteousness, duties, and codes of conduct for the four varnas (castes), moral, legal and ethical codes. She knew Political Science and could well discriminate between right and wrong. She thought before she spoke and used her words carefully, beautifully and properly, they carried weight and her opinion was valued by her husbands' and friends. Her knowledge is evident in her discussions with Yudhishtira about the necessity of war and also later about his acceptance of kingship. In that way, she acted as the guiding force for her husbands. However, Draupadi was not a dumb follower of her husbands. She had her own individuality. Though soft spoken, she used harsh language even for her husbands and others when necessary. In her lamentation she condemned Yudhishtira but that was because of her unbearable grief for the sufferings of her husbands in their exile. She admired all her husbands as seen in her description of them to Jayadratha. She knew the strength and weakness of her husbands, and so it

was Bhima whom she sent to get the Saugandhika and Panchavarna flowers. This too was not for her selfishness, but to make the difficult inaccessible place free and safe for all. She sent Arjuna to the battle as the charioteer of cowardly boastful Uttara to defeat the Kauravas while he was in the guise of Brhannala. Draupadi had the presence of mind and fearlessness even during calamities. She could rebuke and threaten the Kauravas, Jayadratha, and Kichaka for molesting her and was bold enough to argue with the members of the assemblies of the Kurus and also of Virata. She lived a hermit's life of celibacy for thirteen years and endured the hardships of exile, yet she never bore injustice, and could not tolerate the wrong done to her. She urged Krishna and her husbands to punish her tormentor Duryodhana, for which she wept and rebuked them. She herself observed austerities like sleeping on a stone slab to bring about Duryodhana death. Everybody including Duryodhana knew that none could defeat the Pandavas whose success Draupadi wished before the war. Draupadi's torment and insult could never be forgotten by anyone. Draupadi never swerved from her duties and responsibilities, however, difficult and painful they were. She left her sons; to accompany her husbands to spend the arduous twelve years of exile in the forest. Though the daughter of a king and the queen of a great kingdom, wife of five famous heroes of a renowned family, mother of five valorous sons, friend of Krishna, brought up and used to live in luxury, Draupadi lived a tough life with her husbands even in the forest, sleeping on the ground in huts and when necessary served as a maid also. Her endurance was tremendous. Draupadi, though staunch in demanding revenge and atonement for the evil deeds, had the fortitude to overcome the unbearable anguish at the cruel murder of all her sons and to undertake her duties again. She was equally kind and always ready to forgive. After the death of all the Kauravas in the war, she was sympathetic towards Gandhari and Dhritrashtra though they were the parents of her tormentors. She respectfully served them and wept when they left for the forest.

Kunti's character also runs parallel to that of Draupadi. She was born to king Sura, the chief of Yadus. She was named as Pratha but her father had promised his childless cousin, Kuntibhoja, to give him his first born, so Pratha being his first born became the daughter of Kuntibhoja and came to be known as Kunti. "In the Mahabharata, Kunti is referred to as an incarnation of siddhi (success, fulfillment). Siddhi she did attain, but late and after what a sacrifice. Her life reads like a saga of miseries with short spells of happiness in between" (Bhawalkar 158). Kuntibhoja was always proud of his daughter's conduct and saw in Kunti, a disciplined, sensitive, obedient girl. She always followed the path of Dharma (righteousness). Even for this, she left her newly born, born out of wedlock relationship. She chose Pandu in her svayamvara ceremony but she never had any child from this marriage. As a faithful wife, she denied the relationship with any other man to bear children. When king Pandu married for the second time, she did not show much jealousy. She lived with Madri like her sister. When Pandu departed to the forest for relaxing himself, Kunti and Madri also accompanied

him there. In the forest he killed a sage in mating condition so he cursed Pandu that if he would make any physical intimacy with his wives he will lose his life. Deeply upset by the turn of events Pandu decided to live a life of austerity. Kunti and Madri also lived an austere life in the forest for several years. On the request of Pandu, she summoned the different gods to beget the sons. She also helped his co-wife to have summoned beautiful twin gods Aswins. Madri also begot two beautiful sons Nakula and Sahadeva. Kunti never differentiated between her sons and Madri's sons; in fact, she loved Nakul and Sahdev more than others. As a dutiful mother, she did her best for her sons. "Kunti was an ideal Kshatriya mother. She brought up her own children and those of Madri in the finest traditions of Kshatriya princes. It was the result of her training that the Pandavas came to imbibe the highest human qualities of bravery, courage, sacrifice, respect for elders, truthfulness and so on" (Mani 71). But she was also a clever mother. In Khandavprastha, when Kauravas tried to kill the Pandavas, then Kunti sheltered a woman with five sons to deceive the Kauravas. In the fire of lakshagraha sheltered mother with her five sons burnt alive and Kauravas took them as Pandavas. This act of Kunti can never be praised as a mother but she understood the demand of the time and saved her sons. Despite her shrewdness, Kunti's goodness could not keep herself indifferent to other's problems. That is why she helped to end a demon in a village by ordering Bheem to vanish that demon. She was neither a reactionary or nor a revolutionary type of woman rather she was assertive and follower of the rules and regulations of the society. Kunti was so emotionally attached to her sons that she never tempted them for any revolt. She always encouraged her sons to follow the path of righteousness. As a mother-in-law, she always loved Draupadi like her daughter and she even admitted that she loved Draupadi more than her sons. Kunti was strong but silent, virtuous but curious. Despite her all good qualities, she has done injustice to Karna. She never told anyone about the Karna as Satyawati disclosed about the son Vyasa to Bhishma. She did sacrifice on every step of the life. "Some people though virtuous, are born destined to suffer miseries throughout their lives. Kunti seems to be one of them. In the chapter of the index in the beginning of the Mahabharata, she is referred to as Siddhi, success, and prosperity, but no such Siddhi is found in her life. Kunti faced calamities one after the other with some spells of happiness in between. The story of her life reads like a saga of miseries. She attained Siddhi in the end, but what a price!" (Bhawalkar 249). After the war, Gandhari and Dhritrashtra retired to the woods to immerse themselves in severe penances. Kunti also accompanied them rejecting the objections of her sons. She could not forget her abandoned son. "So, all the sufferings of Kunti ended in her fulfillment. Her miseries were as if an atonement of her guilt and she achieved her goal just as a river though flowing through rocky beds, in the end, reaches the sea and merges in it" (Bhawalkar 267).

Gandhari is introduced in the Ansvatama part. She was the daughter of Subala, the king of Gandhara and sister of Sakuni. Both brother and sister were well versed in politics and economics.

When Bhishma came to know about Gandhari, he decided to marry Dhritrashtra with Gandhari so he sends messages to the king Subala. When Gandhari came to know about Dhritrashtra and his blindness she folds a piece of cloth and tied it over her eyes and vows to blindfold herself for the rest of her life. This sacrifice of Gandhari cannot be underestimated as a wife. She always remained an obedient and dutiful wife but she never forgot her Dharma. In that way, she always played the role of a friend and a guide to her husband. Gandhari's life was full of complications. When Kunti gave birth to Yudhishtira Gandhari became frustrated because she had thought that her son would be the eldest son of the kuru princes and thus he would become the king of Hastinapur. But her dream was shattered on the birth of Yudhishtira .

There developed a kind of enmity between Kauravas and Pandavas. Duryodhana was so jealous of Pandavas that he even denied giving the land equal to the tip of the needle. He was so restless to take revenge from Pandavas that he didn't leave any single chance to insult them. Gandhari scolded Duryodhana several times whenever he had chosen the wrong path. Dhritrashtra appealed Gandhari to convince him for maintaining peace and happiness in the family and the kingdom, Gandhari addressed Duryodhana:

O Duryodhana, attend, O dear son, to these words of mine that are beneficial to thee as also to all thy followers,--words that thou art competent to obey and that will conduce to thy happiness. O Duryodhana, obey thou the words of thy well-wishers,... That king who knoweth well how to conquer lust and wrath and avarice and boastfulness and pride, can own the sovereignty of the whole earth. That king who is desirous of gaining wealth and virtue and vanquishing his enemies should always be engaged in controlling his passions. Influenced by lust, or from wrath, he that behaveth deceitfully towards his own kinsmen or others can never win many allies. (5.229.249)

In Hastinapur, "Gandhari ranks very high in the galaxy of the ideal women in Indian history" (Mani70). In the assembly hall, she warned her sons to face the big result for insulting Draupadi in court. Gandhari never left the path of righteousness. However, she could not tolerate the cruel murder of her hundred sons in the war field. She cried bitterly seeing the battlefield scene with her inner eyes. She was lamenting for her widow daughters- in- law and their fatherless children. For this, she blamed lord Krishna and cursed him. Gandhari had acquired that power because of her worship of lord Shiva. She was very angry with Bheem who killed Duryodhana. We can say that fate had been too cruel to Gandhari.

Fate is very cruel to Gandhari. A paragon of virtue who never strayed from the path of righteousness, she of her own volition, made the agonizing decision to blindfold her making it impossible to see hundred sons and one daughter. She has three burden to bear: a vacillating husband who, due to filial affection, approves and accepts the unrighteous schemes of his son; a hundred sons who, prompted by jealousy, eschew dharma; and a brother who becomes an active accomplice of his unrighteous nephews. (Rajan,152)

Conclusion

Kunti didn't spend much time with her husband to guide her or be his critic but Draupadi and Gandhari were both devoted wives and forceful critic. They were "active and passive, articulate speaker and symbolic listener"(Brodbeck and Black 21). Polyandry was in practice at that time. In Mahabharata, Draupadi and Kunti both felt the pain of this evil practice of the society. This is an exception, "Draped is the only female character in scriptures that is polyandrous, whereas many heroes are polygamous. According to the story, she enters into this situation not necessarily out of her own making but because her mother-in-law, Kunti, inadvertently instructs her son Arjuna to share the "prize" that he had brought home with his brothers "(Bandalamudi 146). But she also felt jealous and was angry when Arjuna brought Subhadra as his wife. She didn't accept it very easily. Same has happened with Kunti when Pandu married Madri. On the system of polyandry, "the myths tell us that a man wishes to be a shining moment in the lives of as many women as possible while a woman tries to be all things to one man "(Doniger 305). Arjuna married to the women related to different races like Chitrangada (a hill tribal girl), Ulupi (Naga girl), Subhadra (lord Krishna's sister). These marriages were beneficial from the political point of view. These relatives helped Kauravas and Pandavas in the war. Throughout the epic, it was Draupadi who has suffered the most though she tried to tackle every situation with her smartness and intelligence and she was successful to a certain extent. These women characters has their own solutions to the problems they had to face. "Within the dominant patriarchal structure womanhood achieves multiple meanings and adopts multiple strategies to confront oppression" (Bandalamudi 142). The women of the Mahabharata are incarnate in the women of today. To read the stories of our relationships is to read the stories of our relationships.

They demand from the men of today the same reflection on their perceptions, attitudes, and pretensions too, as they did from the men in their lives, and equally often from other men full of pretensions, even if they were kings and sages. Even in the modern world, these women characters can be ideal examples as to how a woman must lead her life with courage and dignity.

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P: ISSN NO.: 2394-0344

Remarking An Analisation

E: ISSN NO.: 2455-0817

RNI No.UPBIL/2016/67980

Vol-I* Issue-VI*September - 2016

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