

# Journey to the Ancient World: Revisiting the Role & Position of Women in *The Mahabharata*

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## Abstract

India has been revered for its ancient epics which have laid the very foundation of Indian culture. The Mahabharata by Ved Vyas is the classic & greatest epic of India. It epitomizes the Indian genre of historical literature known as Itihasa. It is grand in its design because of minute & authentic portrayal of so many characters, especially the portrayal for women characters as strong, bold, assertive, fierce & having independent existence. Women characters were engaged in tremendous & significant activities during Mahabharata era. This epic presents the beauty of Indian women with some moral characters. These characters will definitely serve as a model for modern feminists. This paper will aim to analyze the portrayal of interesting female characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Madri, Satyawati, Ganga, Uttara, Rukmini & others from Feminist perspective. This paper will also focus on how these characters rebelled against patriarchal oppression & at the same time conformed to the norms of patriarchal society

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, Feminists, Oppression, Subjugation, Women Characters.

## Introducing *The Mahabharata*

*The Mahabharata* is one of the two major epics of ancient India written in Sanskrit language. It was written by Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa. Divided into 18 Parvas, it is the longest epic poem of the world. The whole epic is centered around the battle of Kurukshetra between the Pandavas & the Kauravas over the throne of Hastinapura. It was believed that following the instructions of Vyasa, Lord Ganesh composed the epic. *The Mahabharata* is of immense importance in Indian culture. It is a book of life. It is not only about a civil war, rather it gives us lessons of morality & also makes us aware of the vices. The characters are of significant importance—each of them reflects particular virtue or vice. According to Rashmi Vajpayee, women have battled to assert themselves as self-reliant individuals & to vindicate their identities in a patriarchal society. Constantly, these figures have exhibited a high level of bravery in numerous myths. The female characters of the epic reflect the position of women at that time.

## Introducing Feminism

Feminist Movement is a 19<sup>th</sup> century movement which refers to a series of political campaigns to reform issues associated with women like reproductive rights, education,

sexual violence. The main purpose is to challenge the systematic inequalities of women at every step. The three terms 'feminist', 'feminine' & 'female' are different from each other. Feminist means being feminine or being a woman. Femininity means a set of attributes associated with women including their appearance, dress, behavior etc which are created by society. Female refers to the biological identity of a girl. Feminism can broadly be divided into 4 phases:

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- 1<sup>st</sup> wave (1850-1910) is concerned with fundamental political rights for women.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> wave (1960) is concerned with cultural & social rights including reproduction, domestic violence, marriage, employment etc.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> wave talks about freedom of women in every aspects of life. Nothing including gender roles can be imposed on them.
- 4<sup>th</sup> wave deals with justice for women. They criticize body shaming & sufferings of women due to male gaze.

## Satyavati: The Dutiful Mother

Satyavati was the daughter of the fisherman chieftain Dasharaja & was brought up on the banks of the river

Yamuna. She was the mother of Ved Vyasa. Shantanu, king of Hastinapura, felt attracted to her fragrance & beauty. She married Shantanu on the condition that her son would be the future king. Shantanu's eldest son Debabrata agreed to that. Here Satyawati emerges as a diplomatic mother who tries to protect her own lineage by depriving the rightful one. Later she got overwhelmed by Bhishma's devotion towards the king & kingdom.

Satyawati's role becomes crucial as she voluntarily requested her eldest son Vyasa to become the father of the next generation of Hastinapura. Vyasa produced the child from Ambika & Ambalika's womb through the process of 'Niyog Santati'. According to this rule, women were considered as a field or place of production. If a married man died childless, then his wife was allowed to make sex with his younger or elder brother or any healthy man to produce child. This kind of Santati was not for sexual pleasure, it was just for continuing the generation. Thus Satyawati was responsible for the birth of Dhrtarashtra & Pandu. Satyawati went to the forest to live a sacred life after the death of Pandu. She was a powerful woman who ruled the kingdom successfully after Shantanu's death & gave detailed instructions to Bhishma about how to control the kingdom. Her far-sightedness, presence of mind & mastery of real politics are praised & at the same time she is criticized for her blind ambitions.

### **Ganga: A Diplomatic Mother**

King Shantanu fell in love with Ganga during hunting at the bank of the river. He proposed to marry her & told her that the future of Hastinapura was in her hand. Ganga agreed but gave him a condition that the king should unquestionably follow her actions. When Shantanu would question her, she would leave him forever. This was a significant thing in ancient India that women laid conditions for marriage. Ganga drowned her seven sons one by one & after the birth of 8<sup>th</sup> son, Shantanu protested against her decision. Ganga told him that she was protecting her children from Lord Brahma's curse. Her character is important as the mother of Bhishma & she advises her son in various political affairs. Ganga is worshipped by the Hindus as an epitome of cleanliness & purity.

### **Kunti: A Helpless Mother**

Kunti was the daughter of Kuntibhoja & the wife of Pandu. She was the mother of the first three Pandava brothers. Before her marriage, she was gifted with a baby boy by Sun God. But due to societal pressure & in fear of scandal, Kunti was compelled to abandon her son Karna. This is also the condition of women even today that they have to follow the 'norms' of society—any child born out of wedlock is considered illegal. The society always criticizes women for any kind of scandal. Kunti later identified that her son Karna was alive & during the battle of Kurukshetra, she pleaded Karna to join the team of the Pandavas. Here Kunti is presented as a selfish mother who approached Karna for the protection of her son Arjuna:

“Cut Yourself off from the Dhrtarashtras & enjoy Yudhishthira's fortune, the fortune once won by Arjuna & then greedily stolen by scoundrels. Let the Kurus today witness the meeting of Karna & Arjuna in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Kunti is presented as dependent on her husband & her sons. Kunti is a helpless woman victimized by patriarchy but at the same time emerges as an ideal mother of five sons. Indian motherhood always plays a sacrosanct role in a woman's life & has often overshadowed other roles.

### **Gandhari: A Devoted Wife & A Responsible Mother**

Gandhari was the sister of Sakuni. She was given no opportunity to choose her husband. Bhishma approached her father with a marriage proposal from Dhrtarashtra & Gandhari had to accept that. She is the representative of an ideal wife who covered her eyes with a piece of cloth forever only because her husband was blind. In this respect, she is considered a 'sati' by the Indians. But critics like Iravati Karve points out that this act of blindfolding was actually a protest against Bhishma's decision. However, like a devoted wife she supported her husband & also criticized his excessive obsession for the throne of Hastinapura.

As a mother of hundred Kauravas, Gandhari was no so much blind to her sons like her husband. She protested against Duryodhana's decision of taking the kingdom illegally from the Pandavas. She was more insightful than her husband. She believed that Duryodhana would bring

ominous consequences to the Kuru dynasty. She tried to make him realize that Yudhishthira was the rightful owner of the throne. But at the end of the epic, when she saw that Duryodhana was destined to be killed in the hand of Bhima, she desperately tried to protect her only living son with her vision. For the first time, she put off the scarf from her eyes & looked at him. Here she becomes an ideal mother who is trying her best to protect the child. She derived her visionary power from Lord Shiva, a male God. Vyasa also points out that being a woman, her blessings did not work before the masculine strength of Bhima. She knew the rules of warfare so she cursed Bhima for hitting Duryodhana on his thighs which was against the rule of fighting. Gandhari had the courage to curse Lord Krishna for Duryodhana's death. Gandhari on the one hand is presented as a woman who is full of political knowledge & diplomacy & at the same time a dutiful wife.

#### **Rukmini: A True Devotee**

Rukmini is considered as a minor character in the epic. She was the princess of Vidharva & the sister of Rukman. At that time, Swayamvara was a common event where women had to choose their husband independently. But Rukmini's marriage was forcibly fixed with Sishupala without her consent. She loved Lord Krishna & requested him to help her. She prayed before goddess Gauri so that she could meet her lover. Her pure devotion compelled Krishna to rescue her. Rukmini's character is not the part of mainstream storyline of the epic but she represents a powerful woman who has the courage to deny the decision of her parents & choose her lover Lord Krishna as her life partner.

#### **Madri: A Devoted & An Ideal Wife**

Madri is a short-lived character in *The Mahabharata*. She was the sister of Madra king Shalya. He made friendship with Pandu & as a gift offered Madri to her for marriage. Here also her opinion was not taken into consideration. Madri was the mother of Nakula & Sahadeva. She was an ideal wife who killed herself by jumping into Pandu's funeral pyre.

#### **Amba-Ambika-Ambalika: Victims of Patriarchy**

Amba, Ambika & Ambalika were the three daughters of the King of Kashi. Amba loved king Salva but Bhishma forcibly brought them for Vichitravirya's marriage. Again we find that the opinions of women are neglected. But when Bhishma came to know about Amba's real love, he decided to send her back. Ambika & Ambalika became the mothers of Dhrtarashtra & Pandu. In *The Mahabharata*, we find that marriages mainly took place through kidnapping, paying bride price & also by taking mutual consent.

Amba's character is an example of what the fury of a woman could do. Getting rejected by King Salva, Amba threatened Bhishma that she would be the cause of his death & to take revenge on him she came back as Shikhandi. Seeing her in the battlefield, Bhishma was compelled to surrender before the arrows of Arjuna. Thus a single woman became responsible for the death of a great warrior like Bhishma.

#### **Draupadi: The Fearless Woman**

Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupada is regarded as an ideal Indian woman. She was described by four attributes- priya, darsaniya, pandita & pativrata. She was born out of fire. She was the heroic wife of the Pandavas. She was well-educated, conscious of the responsibilities of a wife. She chose Arjuna as her husband in her Swayamvara. She had her own opinion, she did not abide by the instruction from anybody. She boldly rejected Karna because he was the son of a charioteer. In patriarchal society, women are regarded as objects to be won or lost. After marriage, Arjuna informed Kunti that he has brought a 'thing' or 'bhiksha' for his mother. This objectification was absolutely humiliating for Draupadi. Kunti ordered her sons to divide the 'thing' among themselves. Thus Draupadi became the wife of five husbands.

Draupadi established a healthy & happy relationship with her husbands. Her beauty was her pride & this was used to control & manipulate the men. To show their masculine strength over Draupadi, the Kauravas cheated the Pandavas in the game of dice & Draupadi was disrobed in the middle of the Assembly Hall by Duhshasana. She was outspoken & alone protested fearlessly against such humiliation:

“What greater humiliation than that I, a woman of virtue & beauty, now must invade the men’s hall ? What is left of the Law of Kings ? From of old, we have heard, they do not bring law-minded women into the hall. This ancient eternal law is lost among the Kauravas.” (Buttinen, 59)

She directly criticized Yudhisthira & others: “Bharata, whom did you lose first? Yourself or me ?” (Buttinen, 47) She questioned Bhisma, Drona, Dhrtarashtra & the senior members of Kuru family about the righteousness of Kauravas’ action. She said that Bharata lineage had lost its reputation through this humiliation. Very significantly, when Draupadi failed to control Duhsasana, she prayed to a male God Krishna to protect her honour. This was very significant because Draupadi’s humiliation was the main cause of the great war. She instructed Bhima to kill Duhsasana & with his blood, she would wash her hair & took revenge for her humiliation. Desite all these circumstances, she never gave up on her husbands. Many critics consider Draupadi as the first feminist. In many cities, Draupadi is worshipped as fierce virgin goddess who was let down by her husbands.

### Conclusion

A.K. Ramanujan considers *The Mahabharata* as ot only a piece of literary work, but tradition of Indian life. It shows a variety of traits of attitudes towards women. The definition of a woman is primarily a wife & a mother. Women should be protected & honored & the state where women like

Draupadi was disrobed had no right to exist. This epic points out the practice of having sons compulsorily for succession of kingdoms. The women in the epic are knowledgeable in politics, statecraft, warfare & diplomacy. But sometimes they are humiliated by society. Women have strong selfhood & these characters teach us the greatest lessons of life of hoe to be courageous, faithful & devoted.

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