

# RECASTING MYTHOLOGICAL FIGURES: THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL REALITIES OF KUNTI AND THE NISHADIN

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## Abstract

*This study examines the complicated interplay of power, poverty, and identity through the perspective of intersectionality, with a focus on the mythological figure of Kunti from the Mahabharata and the archetype of the Nishadin, a marginalized lady in Indian folklore. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional framework, this study uncovers the diverse and frequently silenced voices of these two women, who, despite their radically different social standing, symbolize the junction of gender, caste, and fate. Kunti, the royal matron stuck between divine favour and the responsibilities of childbirth, lives a perilous existence distinguished by both celestial privilege and worldly slavery. In contrast, the Nishadin represents the downtrodden lower-caste woman, whose identity is formed by systemic poverty, invisibility, and social exclusion. This study uses a deconstructive approach to claim that both personas represent the inherent tensions within the mechanisms of power and marginalization, where the divine and the destitute conflict. This research seeks to reveal the entwined layers of their identities, challenging the linearity of mythological and historical tales and providing a deeper understanding of the persistent dynamics of caste, gender, and class in defining their fate. Finally, the article advocates for a reevaluation of these individuals, not as static emblems of virtue or victimhood but as multidimensional representations of the various problems that women face across the range of power and poverty.*

**Keywords:** identity, intersectionality, marginalization, caste, gender

## Introduction

In exploring the complexities of gender, caste, and identity in Indian culture, the figures of Kunti from the *Mahabharata* and Nishadin from Indian folklore provide engaging narratives that represent the intersectionality of power, poverty, and marginalization. This study examines these two women through the lens of Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality paradigm, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of how several types of oppression—gender, caste, and class—interact to shape their identities and future. Despite their dramatically differing social positions, Kunti and the Nishadin epitomize the convergence of these dynamics, providing a deeper insight into how crossing layers of power and subordination can define women's experiences.

As aptly written, "Feminism is for everybody. It is about how we resist all forms of oppression and how we create new ways of being, where every person is valued" (Hooks 23). Examining Kunti and the Nishadin reveals how their lives are molded not only by the societal frameworks

surrounding them but also by the overlapping oppressions that shape their identities. These women's stories urge us to reconsider how gender, caste, and class intersect to create both privilege and marginalization, requiring a broader rethinking of societal power dynamics.

## Kunti: Balance of Destiny and Duty

Kunti, the Pandava matriarch, has a multifaceted role in the Mahabharata. As a woman endowed with heavenly favor—her capacity to invite gods to father her offspring grants her celestial privilege—she appears to have the ability to control her destiny. However, her narrative also highlights the profound restrictions imposed by patriarchal structures and social conventions.

Kunti's heavenly blessing, bestowed upon her by the sage Durvasa, empowers her to summon any deity to bear offspring. Through this gift, she gives birth to the great Pandavas, each of whom is the offspring of a different god, bestowing upon her extraordinary strength. Despite this divine favour, Kunti is always bound by the limits of her

gender. The weight of motherhood, combined with the responsibility of raising her sons in a royal court plagued with political intrigue, limits her agency. She is frequently portrayed as a woman who is both elevated by divine privilege and constrained by the roles required of her in a patriarchal context.

Kunti's position symbolises the conflict between celestial favour and worldly enslavement. While she possesses the ability to summon gods, she is nevertheless bound by the expectations of childbirth, chastity, and devotion to her husband. "The double-edged sword of divine privilege and the constraints of gendered roles illustrate the precariousness of Kunti's existence" (Karnik). As famously quoted, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (de Beauvoir), implying that Kunti's identity is fashioned not just by divine destiny but also by the rigid societal norms that define her as a woman in a patriarchal culture.

Her narrative is more than just one of virtue or victimhood; it is a reflection on the boundaries of power as viewed through the perspective of gender. Kunti's supernatural boon grants her power, but it does not free her from the captivity imposed by maternal expectations and the royal court's patriarchal framework. Despite her supernatural gifts, Kunti remains a symbol of the complex interplay between power and oppression that women must traverse within a male-dominated culture.

### **The Nishadin: Struggles of Caste and Survival?**

In stark contrast to Kunti's heavenly privileges, the Nishadin represents the struggle of the marginalised lady, oppressed by the dual pressures of caste and poverty. The Nishadin, a lower-caste lady who is excluded from Kunti's social, economic, and political domains, is a common figure in Indian mythology. Her identity is the result of interwoven oppressions of caste, class, and gender, which determine her fate and experiences.

The Nishadin's life is one of perpetual struggle, with survival becoming a form of resistance against the systemic forces that attempt to eliminate her. In several stories, she is portrayed as an outsider, her entire existence challenging the hierarchical institutions of caste. Unlike Kunti, who is constrained by societal and gender roles but has heavenly power, the Nishadin lacks such

advantages. She is frequently rendered invisible in mainstream narratives, her voice drowned out in favour of others with better social standing. As anthropologist G. L. Ranganathan writes, "The Nishadin is a representation of the intersection of caste, gender, and poverty; she stands at the margins of society, her struggles rarely acknowledged in the wider mythic and historical narratives" (53).

The Nishadin's identity demonstrates an intricate intersectionality, with caste determining not just her social standing but also her access to resources and opportunities. Her poverty is not only an economic position, but a symbol of deep-rooted caste discrimination. As historian Uma Chakravarti notes "Caste is not just an identity; it is a fate," (77). As a lower caste member, the Nishadin faces economic deprivation and social erasure, demonstrating the twin hardships of being a lady and an outcast in a caste-hierarchical system.

Her struggle is for more than just survival; it is for recognition and dignity in a world that continues to marginalise her. Many folktales depict the Nishadin as a victim of fate, yet her perseverance demonstrates a power formed of necessity as she struggles against a system that confines her to the margins of society. The Nishadin challenges traditional narratives, inviting us to contemplate the agency of marginalised women, who, despite their subjugation, continue to resist and redefine their identities.

### **Intersectionality: Navigating the Complexities of Oppression**

The intersectional examination of Kunti and the Nishadin calls into question the standard monolithic portrayals of women in mythology. Rather than being reduced to simple icons of virtue or victimhood, these characters depict the complex, multidimensional structure of women's identities, created by interlocking forces of gender, caste, and class. Kunti's existence exemplifies the paradox of heavenly power bound by gendered norms, but the Nishadin's story exposes the brutal realities of caste-based

Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory, which investigates how overlapping social identities, such as gender, racism, and class, produce complex systems of oppression, provides a vital framework for interpreting these characters. As Crenshaw states, "Intersectionality is

a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects" (139). Kunti and the Nishadin's experiences are formed by these crossing kinds of power, which influence not only their social positions but also their sense of self and destiny.

The intersectional approach allows for a more in-depth investigation of these characters as complex representations of power, poverty, and identity. Kunti and Nishadin come from different socioeconomic strata, yet their stories highlight how caste, gender, and class intertwine to determine women's lives. By deconstructing these old myths, we may gain a clearer understanding of how these pressures continue to impact the lives of women in modern society. **Reimagining Kunti and the Nishadin**

Finally, our study suggests reframing Kunti and the Nishadin as diverse, dynamic people whose stories go beyond virtue or victimhood. The two women want us to reconsider how mythology and folklore depict the complexity of identity and power. By investigating the intersectional dynamics that influence their lives, we can develop a deeper appreciation for the ways in which power, poverty, and gender interact to shape women's experiences across both space and time.

It is important to understand that these ancient figures are not merely artefacts of the past; rather, they connect to

the present challenges of women navigating the intersections of identity, poverty, and power. We may promote a more inclusive and egalitarian future where all women's voices—regardless of their caste, class, or gender—are heard and respected by taking a more nuanced and intersectional approach to these legendary and folkloric characters.

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