

Revisiting Some Women
Characters of the
Mahābhārata:
Issues and Perspectives

Ashvini Agrawal
Panjab University, Chandigarh

Background

- Several anthologies have been composed weaving a net around the female characters portrayed in the *Mahābhārata*.
- Scholars have tried to analyze them from their individual perception many a time disregarding the notion of time, age and context.
- The popular belief is that the women during the time of the great Epic were weak, downtrodden, treated unjustly and meekly fell prey to the evil social norms of the day.

- However, our study finds such a view as heavily biased, untruthful and unjust towards the dignity of Indian women.

Objectives

- The present paper has been written with three objectives:
- i) To highlight the stronger side of the character and strength of some female characters on the basis of the internal evidence of the Epic.
- ii) To present an objective view of the socio-cultural conditions.

Outline

- Only a few selected characters have been picked up for the present study which are pertinent to the socio-cultural issues but reflect an all pervading image of femininity of the age.
- Amongst the chosen characters are Gandhari, Kunti, Madri and Draupadi.
- Some contextual references to other characters like Ganga, Stayavati, Ambika, Ambalika, etc. are also used.

Gandhari

- Gandhari is generally taken to be a lady who spent her entire life blindfolded simply because she was married to a blind man.
- She is accused of being a villain, playing a negative role in the Epic simply because she was the mother of the Kauravas.
- She is generally taken to be partial towards her husband and sons in the war and supporting the war against the Pandavas.

Gandhari

- Gandhari spent all her life blindfolded as it would save her from many a social stigma and also personal woes.
- Several aspects of her personality and character that makes her stand out as a strong female character are generally ignored.
- Her role in the war – her talk to Dhritarashtra (*Sabha*, 75).
- Holding Dhritarashtra responsible for war (*Udyoga* 129)

Gandhari

- The blessings given by her to Duryodhana during the war ‘**where ever is *dharma* there is victory**’.
- Her reaction to the events at various occasions – she holds Krishna responsible for war and curses him (*Stri*, 16-25).
- She curses Bhima for hitting Duryodhana on thigh against the rules of righteous warfare (*Stri*, 15).
- She considers social implications and agrees

Kunti

- The wife of Pandu and mother of the three elder Pandava brothers.
- Having a son Karna from Surya before her marriage and her attitude towards her first born illegitimate son.
- Kunti as a mother – her attitude towards her own and Madri's sons.
- Kunti held responsible for making Draupadi as wife of the five Pandava brothers.

Kunti

- Her past – adopted daughter of Kuntibhoja, (*Adi*, 63).
- Her acts as a maiden. Birth of Karna and subsequent events ,(*Adi*, 67. 110).
- Her *svayamavara*. She is described as virtuous at the time of marriage, (*Adi*, 111).
- Her treatment and attitude towards Madri and her sons.
- Madri's opinion about Kunti before the former's death, (*Adi*, 124) – she is backed by

Kunti

- An ideal and doting mother but did not go against established social norms.
- The *Mbh.* portrays her as becoming virgin again after the birth of Karna. Why?
- Pre-marital child. Panini refers to *Kumariputra* but later writers including Patanjali question the term on the ground as to how can a woman having a child be virgin?
- ‘There is pragmatism in her character’ – she does not want to challenge social norms.

Madri

- The younger wife of Pandu and sister of Salya, the king of Madra, (*Adi*, 112).
- Her Marriage to Pandu after payment of the bride price (*Ibid.*)
- Responsible for Pandu's death, (*Adi*, 124).
- Her immolation on the funeral pyre, (*Ibid.*)

Madri

- Social implications of the custom of bride-price.
- Her death – was it *Sati* ?
- Her reasons for ending her life:
 - i) She was the cause of her husband's death.
 - ii) Kunti was capable of treating all the five Pandavas alike.
 - iii) The advice of the sages before Madri's death – a reflection of social norms.

Draupadi

- Daughter of Drupada, the king of Panchala. Also named as Krishna and Panchali, (*Adi*, 67).
- Her *svayamavara* and marriage to the Pandavas, (*Adi*, 185-87).
- The treatment meted out to her.
- The game of dice and her insult (*Sabha*, 66-68).
- Her responsibility for the war and the prophecy at the time of her birth that she would bring about the annihilation of the Kshatriyas, (*Adi*, 166).
- Draupadi is sometimes portrayed as the cause of all misfortunes of the Kuru family.

Draupadi

- Wanted to marry Arjuna and her remark about Karna at the time of the svayamvara, (*Adi*, 186)
- As the wife of the five Pandava brothers (*Adi*, 190).
- The game of dice (*Sabha*, 66-69) –
- Her questions before she was dragged to the court and insulted.
- Her awareness of her legal rights and reaction to maintain her dignity.

Conclusions

- The position of women during the age of the epics –
- A complex mixture of dignity and compromise for the family and social norms.
- No widow burning as a social custom.
- *Niyoga* or Levirate vs. *Sati*.
- Rights and duties of women.
- Awareness about their rights and duties.
- Interpolations in the *Mahabharata* – creating problems of clear social picture.

Need to Rethink

- Change our attitude towards the past, especially women.
- Judge history in the right perspective – in view of time, age and context.

Thanks