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WOMEN OF SUBSTANCE AND HEROISM: A STUDY FROM "THE MAHABHARATA"

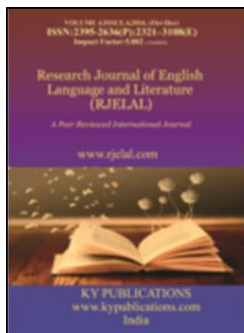
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ABSTRACT



The *Mahabharata* has the honor of being the longest epic in world literature but it is not a mere epic; it is a romance, telling the tale of heroic men and women, and of some who were divine; it is a whole literature in itself, containing a code of life, a philosophy of social and ethical relations, and speculative thought on human problems. It is an embodiment of a scripture which provides traditional, ritual and mythical ground for modern Hindus. In a patriarchal society, men set the rules and women follow them. The status of Hindu women in Indian society has been constantly changing. These changes came through different historical periods. Historically, women in India had to face many ups and downs in the course of their development. From the Vedic age till today, she faced every situation with courage and dignity. But in our mythology women has always been considered the incarnation of 'Shakti.' Women are considered puppets in the hands of man but women in the *Mahabharata* not only stand against the decisions taken by men but also play very important role in many situations. That's why we can't say that the women in the *Mahabharata* are completely subordinate or submissive and don't have their own identity. Women of the *Mahabharata* were helpless in the hands of the Patriarchal system but they cannot be considered weak. They performed their duties and responsibilities as mother, wife, and daughter according to the norms of society. Their ambition, intelligence, and internal strength made them bold and strong enough to face the challenges of life. This paper aims to explore the substance and heroism of the women of the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata*.

Keywords: Individuality, identity, existence, subordinate, mental strength

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INTRODUCTION

"The *Mahabharata* is one of the defining cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in ancient India, and its numerous telling and retellings have helped shape Indian gender and social norms ever since" (Brodbeck, Black 10). The story moves around the struggle for the throne of Hastinapur. The two collateral branches of the family, Kauravas, and

Pandavas combat together in the great war of the *Mahabharata*. However, the *Mahabharata's* story revolves around the revenge, animosity, and war but different characters play a vital role in the evolution of the events. In this process of evolution, women in the *Mahabharata* emerged as strong determined and significant characters.

In the stories through which 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 on the 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. (Badrinath 8)

The patriarchal system that was prevalent could not break their inner self and urge to stand for their individuality and self-respect. Despite the adverse circumstances manipulated by their fate, they stood up strongly against the wrong done to them and were successful in achieving their objectives. However, their position in the patriarchal society was not so strong and they did not have the freedom to take their decisions independently. They were bound by the rules and regulations of society they belonged to and projected themselves as the ideal women in Indian history. Kunti, Gandhari, Satyawati, Draupadi, and Sakuntala are some of the most prominent figures in the *Mahabharata* who have been represented with all the complexities of their personality and they have projected themselves as the strong and influential women characters. To prove their substance and heroism, they handled different situations confidently and smartly turned the situations upside down.

Satyavati: An ambitious but determined woman

Satyavati arranged the course of incidents according to her aspirations.

Satyavati, though a minor character in the *Mahabharata* had an important role in the life of the venerable Bhishma, and also as the mother of the great sage Vyasa who appears throughout in the *Mahabharata* as the most influential and highly revered adviser to the Kauravas and Pandavas whenever necessary. (Bhawalkar 397)

Satyavati's birth was extraordinary like Draupadi or Sita, she was brought up by a fisherman but she proved herself a respectable and powerful queen. Women in the *Mahabharata* exhibit a certain degree of emotional vigor and have perfect control over their impulses. When sage Parasara was attracted towards her she didn't accept her offer at

once rather she took her time to think about the proposal and with a cool mind she asked him to give her the boons according to her wish. She exhibits the excellent presence of mind to turn the situation in her favour. She begins to reveal her ambitious nature and winning tendency. In exchange of sexual intimacy with sage Parasara, she demanded the fragrant body and unimpaired virginity. It is another thing that after this consummation Sage and Satyawati never met again. After this union, Satyawati gave birth to a son who grows to a fully grown man almost immediately. This child came to be known as Ved Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata*. Before leaving, he promises his mother that should she ever need him, all she has to do is to think of him and he would come to help her. King Janamejaya's ancestor Shantanu, the king of Hastinapur has a short-lived marriage with the goddess Ganga and has a son, Devavrata (later called Bhishma a great warrior), Many years later, when King Shantanu goes hunting, he sees Satyawati, the daughter of the chief of fisherman, and asks her father for her hand. Her father doesn't give consent for the marriage unless Shantanu promises to make Satyawati son as next heir to the throne. To resolve his father's dilemma, Devavrata agrees to relinquish his rights to the throne. As the fisherman is not sure about the prince's children honoring the promise, Devavrata also takes a vow of lifelong celibacy to guarantee his father's promise. King Shantanu begot two sons from her, Chitrangada, a valiant hero, and Vichitravirya, a great archer. Satyawati with her supremacy and heroism accomplished her goal of becoming a queen and mother queen later. When king Shantanu died she managed the kingdom with the help of Bhishma. She never surrendered whatever her circumstances might have been. She lost both of her sons, Vichitravirya and Chitrangada. They didn't have any child, so there was no heir to the throne. She became worried about the Kuru race. To save the lineage, she decided to tell about Vyasa to Bhishma so that after taking him into her confidence she could summon the Vyasa to perform the Niyoga. She did the same and Pandu and Dhritarashtra came into existence in the Kuru dynasty. She used her wit and wisdom to protect the Hastinapur throne. She never turned her face from

her duties in spite of so many problems and difficulties.

Kunti: Character of tolerance and intelligence

Kunti's life too was full of complications but she faced them boldly and her patience and self-confidence made her a strong woman. 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. But Kunti's service and hospitality pleased him, so he gave her a mantra by which she could summon any celestial being and have a child by him. Kunti was a very intelligent and curious child by nature and in her curiosity, she committed the biggest mistake of her life. To test its authenticity, she summoned sun God "Surya".

Karna was born due to this mantra but as Kunti was unmarried so she could not have a baby. Kunti set the child afloat in the river for the fear of public disgrace. This Karna came to be known as sut putra as he was picked up and reared by a chariot driver Adhiratha and his wife Radha. Karna became a great warrior. Later Duryodhana became his friend and made him the king of Anga so that nobody could insult him. The sorrow of leaving her first born always tormented her heart. Kunti married to king Pandu but became a widow at a younger age. She brought her sons and Madri's sons back to the Hastinapur and looked after them. However, she knew the ill will of Kauravas towards her sons but she waited for the right time to come so that her sons could get their inheritance. After escaping from the lakshagraha they came to the forest where a demon named Hidimba and his sister Hidimba lived. Bhima killed Hidimba but Hidimba became attracted towards Bhima so she offered him to marry her. Kunti gave her consent because she knew that her sons need powerful alliances to fight with Kauravas. She realized that her helpless, sons need friends, support, and power. She also advised Arjuna to develop an alliance with Nagas, Manipuris, and Yadavas of Dwaraka (through Subhadra). Perhaps she had a strong intuition about the inevitability of war between Kauravas and Pandavas. When Arjuna and other Pandavas returned back to their mother after winning Draupadi in swayamvara, Kunti was

busy in something so unknowingly said, "Whatever it is, divide it amongst you". Soon, she realized her mistake. But she didn't take her words back and the most controversial decision had been taken by the Kunti by ordering her sons to obey her orders. Perhaps, she was aware of the forthcoming destructive war and for that she wanted her sons to stay together to fight the enemy. She also expressed her anger when Draupadi had been insulted by Duryodhana in the court. She motivated her sons to take revenge and act according to the wish of Draupadi. However, she was never revengeful and in the favor of war but at the same time, she was against the injustice done to her sons so she inspired her sons to take their rightful inheritance.

Draupadi: Model of courage and heroism

While Kunti has shown a lot of patience and cool-mindedness, Draupadi is considered as the epitome of unlimited courage, boldness, intelligence and revengeful mindset like a warrior. "Draupadi, as a character, commands a whole range of contradictory meanings. She goes all the way from a non-existent being of nothingness to a full blown character. She is both nowhere and everywhere and inhabits multiple times" (Bandlamudi 153). Like Sita, her birth was not an ordinary one. More interesting thing was that not only her birth but the purpose behind her being born was also dangerous. That's why her role became more challenging. Her name denotes her identity itself. She was the daughter of Drupada, king of Panchala. Drupada had the enmity with Drona but he had no son. To take the vengeance against Drona, he lit a heavenly fire and asked for a son from god but she appeared from that fire as a bonus. He also got a son named Dhrishtadyumna. She has born of fire which had been lit for revenge so her purpose had been pronounced by heavenly voice at the time of her birth

Even all the five Pandavas could not escape from her charm. Though in the text Draupadi is not the silent or submissive type of woman but in this case, she didn't react against Kunti's orders to get married to all the five Pandavas. Perhaps she wanted the Pandva brothers to remain united. Her personal opinions had not been expressed about this marriage. Kunti praised her for her virtues and

her loyalty towards her husbands. Draupadi was a chaste, religious and devoted wife who adhered to her duties and responsibilities. Her integrity and fidelity were admirable. Draupadi's story is an account of, disgrace, humiliation suffering, and revenge. Situations always turned against her but she faced them with courage and heroism and always fought like a true warrior. She was always cautious to please her husbands and had a good relationship with their other wives too. She loved and cared for her mother-in-law respectfully and looked after all her needs. In return, she had become the life and breath of her husbands' and for Kunti, she was dearer than her own sons. "Draupadi, however, is different from the other Kuru women and that is why she is recounted as an enigma" (Sharma 3). She described her daily routine and disclosed the potentials of her character to Satyabhama to keep her husbands under her control and charm. These are not merely dialogues but a woman's concern with, "wifely behavior *per se*, but the question of control and deceit- indeed, one might say, the agency itself" (Brodbeck, Black 101). Later Draupadi declares that she never, in sleeping, eating, or talking, acts against the wishes of her Lord and that she is always guided by her husbands. On one side she acted as an obedient wife while on the other she refused to follow the order in Kuru Sabha when she has been defeated by the Yudhishtira in the dice game. When Yudhishtira lost Draupadi in the game of dice, Duryodhana ordered Dussasana to drag her in the court. When Draupadi came to know about the orders she was shocked. But she didn't follow the orders quietly rather she asked the question whether her husband Yudhishtira had pledged her before or after he had lost himself in the gamble. She reasoned that if he had pledged himself first then he had no right over her as he was already a slave. She mocked Dussasana when he dragged her by the hair to the court and asked him to show his powers against her husbands. She boldly criticizes/asked the elders in the court for becoming the part of this Dharma and asked them to do justice. She didn't get any help from them so she closed her eyes and thought of her friend, Krishna and asked him to save her from being disgraced and insulted.

Her strong will power to save herself gave her the confidence to summon Krishna and use his powers to protect her. Dhritarashtra became scared of Draupadi's curse and to pacify her he asked Draupadi for any three boons. She asked for her husbands' freedom and to return their weapons with respect, she refused the third boon by saying that her husbands were strong and capable enough to win all the rest that they had lost. She not only revolted back but raised the questions against the injustice done to her in the full court. Her anger sowed the seed of revenge in Pandavas. She never let them forget about the revenge. Whenever she got the chance she tried to urge every Pandu son with her sarcastic remarks on them she scolds Arjuna and says, "Fie on that *Gandiva* which none else can string save Arjuna and Bhima and thyself, O slayer of Madhu! fie on the strength of Bhima and fie on the prowess of Arjuna" (3.7.31).

The insecurities that the patriarchal system inculcates in a woman's personality, determine her position in the society. Being the queen Draupadi dominates the affairs whether social or political but her deep rooted insecurities never leave her ideology. She experienced all these insecurities when she faced the insult and humiliation in the full court though she was the daughter of a king and queen of five husbands. Above all this, she herself was a strong and powerful character and never let any of her enemies escape without taking revenge, be he Kichaka or Jayadratha. She combined her intelligence and smartness with the strength of her husbands and always fought for righteousness and justice. Draupadi being the most enigmatic female character of the epic never tolerated any kind of injustice. She had the ability to overcome adversity in an esteemed manner and proves that no situation is impossible to handle.

Conclusion

All the three women Satyawati, Kunti and Draupadi, exhibit the real substance and heroism in their character. They proved themselves emotionally, mentally and physically strong to deal with every situation and they were successful in changing the stereotyped image of a woman, however, they could not surpass the barriers laid by patriarchal society. They were skilled enough to

control the situations those were against them and turned them in their favour. Their individuality and faith in their power helped them to take better decisions. The control over their feelings and emotions made them headstrong women of the epic. As Satyawati broke the social norms with the unity of sage Parasara and became an unwedded mother but she was strong enough to face and tackle the situation with bravery so that her image couldn't be ruined. Draupadi became the victim in many situations but she weaved the thread of life in such a way that she emerged as one of the strongest women of the epic. It is finally said that "The *Mahabharata* presents a galleria of women. Their words and actions make them the driving force behind men. They constantly intervene, manipulate, subjugate and subvert to make a place for themselves and to exercise power. The men think they control them and are superior to them but these are intelligent, brave and beautiful women who cannot be easily brow beaten or subdued" (Sharma 12).

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