

**DYNAMICS OF MOTHERHOOD: THE CURIOUS CASES OF SATYAVATI, KUNTI AND GANDHARI IN THE MAHABHARATA**

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**Abstract**

*The Mahabharata provides a beautiful depiction of the concept of 'motherhood'. It is a cultural text par-excellence and it busts several myths that have been formed regarding 'mothers', more so if they are widows. The first myth that the texts undercuts is that widows in India had had no agency. They are often portrayed as the marginalized female characters relegated to the inner recesses of the household. On the contrary, motherhood and widowhood blend into a distinguished combination of female agency in the text. In the Mahabharata, the characters of Kunti and Satyavati bear testimony to the above stated facts. They have been indeed granted very powerful, responsible, and influential position due to their motherhood inspite of their widowhood. Gandhari, on the other hand, not only blindfolds her eyes but also becomes blind to the mistakes of her sons. It is often argued that the Kaurava-s family tree falls down due to the weakness of Gandhari as a mother.*

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, myth, marginalized, motherhood, widowhood etc.

This article attempts to unfold the untold and unvoiced significance of Indian mothers through the representation of motherhood in the *Mahabharata* in the characters of Satyavati, Kunti and Gandhari. Women in Indian family play a pivotal role as mothers. They are in fact like the thread and the other members of the family are like beads of a garland. If the family is like a tree, mothers are the very root of the family tree. As the thread of a garland remains under the beads and the root of the tree remains under the ground, a mother's significance also remains invisible in Indian family setup. In the article "Women and the Dharamshastras," Kapil Kapoor aptly explains that a mother is the base stone of social structure, "She is Lakshmi, the one responsible for husbanding the resources. As such she must be honoured. No rites or rituals can be performed without her. In receiving respect in

public, she takes precedence over father and teacher” (Kapoor 57). The lines highlight how the philosophy of life revolves around the Indian thought of keeping wife-mother on the highest pedestal of respect and this ultimately leads to the happiness of a family that is a part of the overall social structure. Kapil Kapoor further talks about the conceptualisation of women on three grounds, “as an individual, a woman is seen as fragile and delicate physically in a certain sense but emotionally and spiritually stronger than man. As a social being, she is central to the whole social structure in her bio-social role as mother” (Kapoor 58). Chandrakala Padia emphasizes in the “Introduction” of the book *Women in Dharamshastras* that there is a need to “reemphasise and reinterpret the Indian ideals of *Ardhanarishvara*, *Dharmapatni*, and *Sahadharmini*. It would further help in deconstructing the myth of the so-called superior ‘public’ (male) and inferior ‘private’ (female) in the Western philosophical tradition as the Dharamshastra-s’ ideal is self-realisation equally both for men and women” (6). It can be inferred, therefore, that there is no debate on the equality of a man and a woman in the Dharamshastras-s. This very concept of being superior and inferior on the basis of one’s gender is challenged in the epic *Mahabharata*. It is a myth that widows in India have had no agency and they are marginalised. On the contrary, motherhood and widowhood grant more powerful and responsible position to Indian women. After becoming a widow, a mother has to play the roles of a father as well as a mother. In the *Mahabharata*, the characters of Kunti and Satyavati bear testimony to the above stated facts. They have been indeed granted very powerful, responsible and influential position due to their motherhood and widowhood. They occupy more essential and central position in the family.

The most pertinent discourse in post-modernism revolves around the centre-periphery debate. All the theories that aim at construction of ‘identity’ invariably touch upon the marginal voices gaining centrality in the discourse. The peripheral post-colonial, post-feminist and post-modern subject strives towards attainment of an agency to make way towards the centre. One fine example of a woman gaining central agency in the *Mahabharata* is Satyavati. Born in a family of fishermen, she was designed to marry within her own community culturally and socially. However, she became the queen of Hastinapur, governed, and dominated her husband Shantanu and his son Bhisma. The paper will now unfold the life of Satyavati, Kunti and Gandhari and explain how they successfully create their central and crucial identity in the *Mahabharata* as mothers. It will also be defined how Gandhari fails to assert her agency despite being wife of the king of Hastinapur in comparison with the two widows, Satyavati and Kunti.

Satyavati is perhaps the most ambitious woman in the text. She always keeps some conditions ready for those who get attracted towards her feminine beauty. Before her marriage with Shantanu, she had happened to meet Parashar one day. The great sage got attracted towards the beauty and graceful smile of Satyavati. Satyavati put three conditions

before Parashar. The first condition was to preserve complete secrecy of their union from the people of that place. She got assurance from Parashar, who created a veil of fog that enveloped the whole region in darkness. Virginity of a woman is supposed to be the symbol of her chastity and Satyavati wishes to remain virgin even after her union with the sage. After gaining the boon of not losing her virginity, she asked the sage to grant her a boon that her body might emit a sweet scent (instead of the fish odour that it had). The sage thereupon granted her all the wishes.

When Satyavati got her three conditions fulfilled, she accepted the embrace of Parashar. Out of her communion with Parashar, she gave birth to a son, Vyasa who went away from her on the path of asceticism with the promise of returning to her in times of need. Though the gender and cultural binaries are broken by Satyavati, she is not questioned because she regains her virginity and her son goes on the path of asceticism. Traditionally, the integrity of a woman's virginity has been considered mandatory before marriage. Almost the same thing happens with Kunti also but she has to face the consequences of leaving her son. Unlike Kunti, Satyavati thinks of her present and future and constructs all the conditions favourable to her by putting certain conditions before Parashar. Therefore, in this context, the postmodern perception appears true that the world is interpreted by individuals; the cultural and social construction is made up by individual responses to different things, and such responses cannot be real or true for everyone. Both Kunti and Satyavati become mothers before marriage and hide this secret from everyone. While pre-marriage motherhood is helpful for Satyavati in future, it brings misfortunes to Kunti.

The *Mahabharata* is a cultural text and the postmodernists question the cultural construction of gender binaries and explore how through language, power, and motivation any belief or idea develops. Ann Brook has explained that postmodernism is a cultural study, "concerned with debates linking representations and identities within newly defined cultural spaces" (189). Satyavati has meticulously redefined the cultural spaces to construct her identity.

When Satyavati meets Shantanu, she does not disclose her history to the king for fear of rejection. Taking advantage of Shantanu's strong desire for Satyavati, her father put certain conditions for the king before marriage. Shantanu disapproved of the demand of Satyavati's father and returned to Hastinapur. Satyavati had created a magic on the king with her fragrant and feminine beauty and she was confident that the king would come back to her. Devavrata could not see his father's condition and went to request the chief of the fishermen to give his daughter in marriage with Shantanu. This incident of a son going to fix the marriage of his father is rare even today but the *Mahabharata* is a text in which the cultural doctrines are manipulated with ease to meet the situation. The fisherman asked Devavrata to promise that the son of Satyavati would succeed Shantanu on the throne of Hastinapur. Devavrata accepted the condition of the fisherman for the sake of his father and took the solemn vow of lifelong celibacy.

After her marriage with the king, Satyawati governed not only her husband but also dictated her step son Devavrata, who came to be known as Bhishma due to his vow of remaining unmarried for the whole life. Satyawati gave birth to two sons, namely Citrangada and Vicitravirya. Bhishma obeyed the command of Satyawati and installed Citrangada on the throne of Hastinapur. Citrangada unfortunately died an early death in a battle. After the death of Citrangada, Bhishma installed Vicitravirya, still a minor, on the throne of the Kurus.

Kunti, Satyawati's grand-daughter-in-law, is a remarkable character in the *Mahabharata*. She is especially known for her motherhood. In her maidenhood, she served the fiery sage Durvasa, who rewarded her with a boon in the form of a *mantra*. He proclaimed, "thou shall be able to summon (to thy side) whatever celestials thou likest. And, by their grace, shall thou also obtain children" (Ganguli, *Adi Parva: Sambhavab Parva* Section: LXVII 144-145). The righteous Kunti, in excitement, tried to test the power of the *mantra*. She invoked the Surya deva, who responded promptly to the call. She saw the beaming and radiant Sun god coming near her and saying, "Here I am, O black-eyed girl! Tell me what I am to do for thee" (Ganguli, *Adi Parva: Sambhava Parva* Section: CXI235). Kunti tried her best to convince the Sun god that she had only tested the potency of the *mantra*, but the Sun god didn't agree to return without granting her a child. As a result of this communion, Kunti gave birth to a son, Karna who was born laced with celestial armour and earrings.

Fearful of her social standing, Kunti disposed the child by floating him in the river Ganga and kept her chastity intact to the world. Later on, she chose Pandu in *svayamvara* only to find him getting married to the captivating Madri. Cursed by a sage, Pandu retreats to the woods along with his two wives. Owing to the curse of the sage, Pandu is unable to mate with his wives and he becomes restless to think of his inability to have a son. He shares his feelings with Kunti in private by quoting what self-born Manu had said, "that men failing to have legitimate offspring of their own may have offspring begotten upon their wives by others, for sons confer the highest religious merit." (Ganguli, *AdiParva: SambhavaParva: Section CXX 251*)

Kunti initially refuses to produce an offspring from another man. This is somewhat ironic as she had once embraced the god Arka (Sun) and like Satyawati she had recovered her virginity after giving birth to Karna. Kunti hides this secret from her husband with her determination to carry on an unblemished reputation. Unlike Satyawati, Kunti keeps her past under wraps and does not disclose anything about her pre-marital son Karna. Pandu tries to convince her to get an offspring from anyone with his sanction, but Kunti keeps her secret undisclosed for a long while. She urges Pandu to be heroic and emulate Vyushitashva who died prematurely because of overindulgence, but whose wife Bhadra obtained seven sons by embracing his corpse. Pandu refuses to invite death-in-intercourse with Kunti (though that is precisely what he does with Madri) and urges that she will only be doing what is sanctioned by the knowledge texts. Finally, Kunti tells him about the *mantra* she learnt from sage

Durvasa and Pandu immediately pushed her to evoke gods for offspring. Kunti evokes the Dharmaraja, the Vayudeva and Indra to get three sons, Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna respectively from them. Very much like his grandmother, Pandu urges Kunti to give him more and more sons. Kunti bluntly refuses, quoting the knowledge texts, which forbid a woman from embracing more than three men (a woman embracing five men is a whore by those standards). She hides the fact that Arjuna is her fourth conception and she has had relations with four different men. Since Pandu accepted her logic, it can be inferred that the gods were indeed men and their godly incarnation was no exemption from the rules prescribed in the knowledge texts. Thus, out of her own mouth Kunti appears to condemn herself unawares. If her logic is applied in a general way, it would be difficult to justify the chastity of Draupadi. However, Draupadi is a completely different case and her marriage to five men has been discussed in the previous chapter in detail.

After the death of Pandu, Kunti brings up five children (two from Madri) in a hostile court, bereft of allies. Quickly she turns to Satyavati's favourite grandson by a maid-servant - Vidura. He proves to be loyal to the family of Pandu. It is he who saves them from being burnt alive in Varnavat and it is in his home that Kunti takes shelter when her sons are exiled. He even accompanies her at the very end into the forest. Iravati Karve has surmised that Dharmaraja, the first "god" summoned by Kunti, is none other than Vidura. However, this surmise has been contested by many scholars of the *Mahabharata*.

Even in the forest, Kunti rallies the drooping spirits of her sons with unerring instinct. Kunti allows the marriage of Bhima with Hidimba, who gave birth to a powerful son named Ghatotkaca. Ghatotkaca went on to save Arjuna from Karna's infallible weapon at the cost of his own life. Thus, the Pandava dynasty is slowly but surely structured into an entity with multiracial affinities. Kunti trains her sons to safeguard the welfare of common people even at the risk of their lives. In Ekacakra, Kunti was living with her five sons in the house of a poor Brahmin. The township was living under the constant threat of a demon namely Bakasur. A deal had been struck between the demon and the inhabitants of Ekacakra. Every family had to send one of its members and enough food for the demon in a stipulated time period. When the turn of poor Brahmin's family came, Kunti sent Bhima to finish the demon. The enforced exile brought her sons into intimate contact with the common people, so that they developed an empathy with the masses. Kunti's maturity and foresight and her ability to observe life closely and set her apart and above all characters in the epic.

Her decision to proceed to Pancala is another step in order to forge a marital alliance with the traditional enemy of Hastinapur and challenge the Kaurava-s. Vyasa had already briefed them about Draupadi's beauty and had urged them to proceed to Pancala to win her. Kunti's foresight perceives that any split among the united five will frustrate the goal of mastering Hastinapur. Hence, she plays that grim charade of pretending not to know what Bhima and Arjuna mean when they ask her to see what they have brought home. She asks the brothers

to share the ‘thing’ they had brought as alms. It is baffling to accept that Kunti was unaware of the fact that Arjuna had won the hand of Draupadi in the court of Drupada. Yudhishthira, Nakula and Sahadeva had slipped out of the *svayamvara* after Draupadi had been won. They might have briefed their mother about the happenings in the court. Kunti knew that the only way to forge an unbreakable link among the five was not to allow them to get engrossed in different wives. Hence, Kunti deliberately asked her sons to share and enjoy whatever they had brought. After ‘discovering’ her ‘mistake’, her only worry was to ensure that her command would fall within the purview of *dharma*. This episode is a magnificent tribute to the total respect and implicit obedience paid by the brothers to Kunti, which is unparalleled in the epic.

Hereafter, Kunti retreats into the background, giving up the place of pride to Draupadi. After this, she emerges from the shadows to intervene decisively thrice. When her sons are exiled, she decides to stay back in Hastinapur as a silent but constant reproach to Dhritarastra about her sons’ violated rights. Later, in the *UdyogaParva*, she tells Karna, who has come on a peace-mission, to urge Yudhishthira to fight for their rights as ksatriya-s must. To secure the safety of her sons, she takes the conscious decision to undergo the trauma of acknowledging her shame to her first-born, kept secret so long. Though she is rejected by Karna, he promises her that he would not kill any Pandava but Arjuna. Moreover, she effectively weakens him from within. While he knows that he is battling his mother’s sons, the Pandava-s are only aware that he is the detestable charioteer’s son.

Kunti has a rare capacity to surprise us as she decides to retire to the forest along with Dhritarastra and Gandhari, to spend her last days serving those who were responsible for her sufferings. Kunti tells her sons that she has no desire to enjoy the luxury of the palace after the scores have been settled between the Pandava-s and the Kaurava-s. She effortlessly transcends the symbiotic bonds of maternity. It has been expounded by many that she is probably the incarnation of *siddhi* (fulfilment). She is indeed the consummation of womanhood and the archetype of a single mother. Madri, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari and Subhadra represent the exact opposite. Madri immolates herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. Gandhari blinds herself so that she does not exceed her husband. Kunti is different from all of them. She not only decides her own destiny, but also guides the fate of her powerful sons, who look towards her for guidance in every situation. Kunti is an answer to all those who bring forth the passivity of women in the classical Indian texts.

The next important character defining motherhood in the *Mahabharata* is Gandhari. When she was married to Dhritarastra, she put a blindfold over her eyes to renounce the gift of vision, which her husband does not possess. If the world of sight did not exist for her husband, then she did not want it for herself either. However, many critics opine that she took this decision to showcase her passive resistance of being married to a blind man.

Unlike the other female characters in the epic, Gandhari has no desire to see the face of the man she is married to and with whom she has to spend a lifetime, the one who is supposed to father her children. When Gandhari became a mother, she did not see the face of her children either. Her blindfold remains firm on her face throughout the *Mahabharata*. Towards the end of the Great War, when Duryodhana has lost all the warriors on his side, she opens her blindfold once to make her son powerful enough to turn the result of the war overhead singlehandedly.

Gandhari is one of the most prominent female characters in the *Mahabharata*. During her years as queen in the Kaurava court, she is present for many of the pivotal events that lead to the fateful encounter at Kurukshetra. In particular, she witnesses the dicing match and the disrobing of Draupadi; and she monitors a number of attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement described in the *Udyogaparva*. Although she remains silent during most of these scenes, she does speak up on a number of occasions, trying to persuade her son Duryodhana not to go to war, and criticizes her husband for not standing up against their son.

Gandhari's attempts to avert the war are of no avail. However, her ability to intervene effectively is illustrated after the failed attempt of disrobing of Draupadi, when she forces the king to step in and put an end to the abuse inflicted upon Draupadi. Although Gandhari's involvement is subtle, it prompts the king to grant Draupadi a boon, which in turn leads to setting the Pandava-s free from the conditions of the first dicing match. In addition to her attendance at events leading up to the war, Gandhari is present throughout Sanjay's account of the war, as indicated by several explicit references to her and the other women of the Kuru court.

As Brian Black rightly points out, Gandhari's presence in the Kaurava court before and during the war has particular relevance in connection with her grieving on the war-torn battlefield after the war, when Vyasa grants her the divine vision, allowing her to see despite her blindfold the mourning of the Kuru women. During her dialogue with Krishna, she describes in vivid detail the dismembered bodies that are strewn across the blood-soaked battlefield. She mourns the deaths of her sons, speaks of the losses suffered by the Kuru women, and makes several statements denouncing the war. Her narration to Krishna is not based on the temporary divine vision that has been granted to her by the sage Vyasa. It is an amalgam of all that she has heard and felt during the war, the losses she has suffered and the pains she has gone through. In her dialogue with Krishna, she makes a number of remarks that indicate her awareness of how events are reported, pointing out the irony that the warriors who were 'regularly celebrated by bards singing their praises' are now surrounded by the cries of jackals. In contrast to the wailing women in the battlefield, Gandhari is able to verbalize her sorrow, with her remarks suggesting that there is a direct connection between her role as a listener and her role as speaker and chief articulator of the grieving and suffering of the Kuru women. Since she has played a crucial role in the preceding episodes

leading up to the war, she understands its complexities and is able to look back and reflect on what she has seen and heard. Despite her own losses, Gandhari primarily reports to Krishna about the grief of others, which makes her narration all the more poignant and so unique. Her divine sight gives her access to the mourning of Kuru women, yet her role as listener informs her ability to articulate these disparate accounts in a transmittable narrative that gives a voice to the otherwise silent Kuru women.

To conclude, motherhood is a powerful means of understanding the challenge posed by the female characters of the *Mahabharata*. After analysing the lives of the three women one can say that women as mothers are not god or divine. They can commit mistakes also. Satyawati's treatment towards Bhisma is indifferent and unacceptable. She thinks only about her own blood. On the other hand, Kunti's leaving of Karna whom she gives birth before marriage is also cruel. She thinks of the society and her own reputation. Gandhari not only blindfolds her eyes but also becomes blind to the mistakes of her sons. Therefore, due to her weakness the Kaurava-s family tree falls down. In all the three women, Kunti proves to be stronger as a mother. Motherhood rips apart the established patriarchal set-up that gives agency to the men to decide the fate of nations.

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