

Silenced Voices: Exploring Women in the Epic Mahabharata

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Abstract

Marginalizing of women is the characteristic of patriarchal society while their resistance against this marginalization is a natural reaction. This reaction becomes resonant as the voice of resistance. Women have registered their protest against their status as secondary to men even in early stages of history; though the voice of resistance might have been low. This voice helps to understand the consciousness of the woman, her views towards and her ever changing condition in the society. Many such references, examples and descriptions can be found from the ancient literature in which reverberation of the woman's identity can be heard. Several such stories are also available in the epic Mahabharata. This paper explores these voices of resistance which were silenced in due course of time strategically.

Key Words Women, Mahabharata, Patriarchy, Satyawati, Kunti, Draupadi, Reverberation, Woman's identity

In patriarchal societies, there is a distinct model of conduct, behavior and dignity of women in their public and family life. She is considered modest if she behaves accordingly, or else she is bestowed with different kinds of demeaning remarks. Patriarchy fundamentally strikes on the individuality, identity and freedom of woman and defines her as subordinate to men instead of recognizing her as individual being. She can be the wife of a man, mother of his children, the *Laxmi* of his household or even his property, but her identity as an independent social unit can hardly be found in the patriarchal society. Marginalizing of women is the characteristic of patriarchal society while their resistance against this marginalization is a natural reaction. This reaction becomes resonant as the voice of resistance. Women have registered their protest against their status as secondary to men even in early stages of history; though

the voice of resistance might have been low. This voice helps to understand the consciousness of the woman, her views towards and her ever changing condition in the society. Many such references, examples and descriptions can be found from the ancient literature in which reverberation of the woman's identity can be heard. Several such stories are also available in the *Mahabharata*.

The *Mahabharata* has a distinct place in the ancient Indian literature. In order to understand the different aspects of the society, historians have time and again pointed towards it and explored new information. Perhaps for this reason it is often referred as the fifth *Veda*. There is certainly no doubt that the epic *Mahabharata* has an important place in the historical analysis of Indian society. This epic consists of all the aspects of society, religion, philosophy and economy as well. Apart from the main story, the contents of secondary stories also underline the social condition of women. This document is an analytical study of female characters referred, described and mentioned in the epic *Mahabharata* who were vocal of their desires, expressed their wishes and were conscious about their 'self'.

There are certain common strands in the stories of both epics of India, *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata*. The main theme of the both revolves around polygyny, whether it is the battle of *Mahabharata* or the exile of *Rama*. The main plot of both the epics has been woven on the issue of inheritance of the state / power arose due to polygyny. While in *the Ramayana* the unfolding of events begins with the obstinacy of *Kaikeyi*, in the *Mahabharata*, the terms laid by *Satyavati* and *Shantanu's* getting committed towards those in the eagerness to marry *Satyavati*, elaborate the plot.

There are several female characters in the *Mahabharata* which are the parts of main and secondary stories and are found behaving ideally according to the standards of patriarchy. But there are also some female characters which are self-asserting and protest against the injustice. These are characters which make women feel like a living human being, instead of a commodity; who readily laugh, cry and protest, and even rebel if needed. We will discuss some such female characters in detail. The *Mahabharata* begins with the *Adi Parv*. *Shakuntala*, *Devyani*, *Sharmistha*, *Ganga*, *Satyawati*, *Amba*, *Ambika*, *Ambalika*, *Gandhari*, *Kunti*, *Hidimba*, *Tapti*, *Draupadi*, *Subhadra* etc. are among important female characters of this *Parv*. Among these women *Sharmistha*, *Devyani*, *Shakuntala*, *Ganga*, *Satyawati*, *Amba*, *Hidimba* are the prominent ones. The role of *Sharmistha*, *Devyani* and *Shakuntala* is limited to *Adi Parv*. Though the description of *Hidimba* can also be found later as mother of *Ghatotkach* but she doesn't have any active role there while *Amba* certainly appears in *Udhyog Parv* with elaboration. On seriously considering the legends related to all these women, their characters appear to be negating the traditional portrayal.

Shakuntla is the first important female in the *Adi Parv* who opts for *Gandharv* marriage with *Dushyant* voluntarily. The *Shakuntla* of *Mahabharata* does not resemble the *Shakuntla* of *Kalidasa* (heroine of the Sanskrit play *Abhigyan Shakuntalam*). The heroine of *Kalidasa* is found to be pursuing *Dushyant* while lamenting and cursing her fate. She is pregnant and extremely disturbed from being disapproved by her husband *Dushyant*² whereas the *Shakuntla* of *Mahabharata* enters

the court of *Dushyant* holding the hand of her son and demands for her rights fearlessly.

On being addressed as '*dusta tapis*' by *Dushyant*, she responds that 'my birth and clan is a greater one than yours'. She doesn't lament like the heroine of the *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* on being disapproved, rather from a hurt ego accuses *Dushyant* that, 'his head may get divided into seven pieces'. She declares in front of everyone present in the court that her son, *Bharat* will become the king of the whole kingdom, even without the acceptance of *Dushyant*. She proclaims that she herself is not willing to stay with a man who is not trust-worthy, a liar and deceitful.³

Like *Shakuntala*, the description of *Devyani* and *Sharmistha* in the *Adi Parv* has been given in the form of *Janmejaya-Vaishampayan* dialogue. It is related to the marriage of an ancestor king *Yayati* with Brahmin girl *Devyani*, the daughter of guru *Shukracharya*. The story of *Kach-Devyani* is also associated with this.

Shukracharya had a disciple named *Kach* to whom *Devyani* was attracted. But *Devyani* being the daughter of his teacher *Kach* disapproved her love offering while considering *Devyani* his sister according to the religious norms. Fascinated with sexual desire and in anger *Devyani* cursed him to be a failure of the *sanjivni* knowledge he acquired.⁴ The portrayal of *Devyani* as a woman making advances in love and cursing her lover on the disapproval of the same, is contrary to the *Dharmashastric* discourse. Further, in the *Yayati-Devyani* marriage story there is also a description of the demon king *Vrishparva's* daughter *Sharmistha's* going to *Yayati's* kingdom as a *dasi* along with the married *Devyani*. There in *Yayati's* kingdom, *Sharmistha* in order to have a sexual intercourse with her, not only forges a relationship with *Yayati* by influencing him with various arguments, but even justifies it as 'just and ethical' as well. We find this behavior of *Sharmistha* completely different to the traditional conception of sexuality, morality and the sexual sanctity of women.⁵

The main story of the Mahabharata begins with the entry of *Satyavati* in the *Adi Parv*. There is an indication in the story that *Satyavati* is the daughter of the king named *Uparikar Vasu* who discarded his girl child and left her with the fishermen. This is one of the oldest examples of not accepting a child on the basis of its gender.⁶ Discarded by her biological father *Satyavati* grew up among the fishermen. On being an adult, *Satyavati* established a conditional relationship with two men who were fascinated with her beauty. She not only modified her personality by asking the conduct, behavior, culture and knowledge like the *Aryan* women from the sage *Parasar* as a boon but also got rid-of the stink of fish off her body.⁷ She asked for the inheritance of the kingdom for her son from *Shantanu*, the second man in her life, as a condition for marriage; though this condition was suggested by her foster father *Nishadraj*. *Satyavati* never voiced any kind of protest against it.⁸

The personality of *Satyavati* is of a self-conscious woman. There is no trace of remorse in her personality regarding her pre martial relationship with the sage *Parasar* and the child born from that. She not only accepts her *Kanin* son⁹ publicly but also entrusts her *Kanin* son (*Krishna Dwaipayana Vyas*) with the responsibility to produce *Kshetraj* children from *Ambika* and *Ambalika*, the two children-less widows of *Vichitravirya*.¹⁰

This decision of *Satyavati* attracts our attention to two aspects. Firstly, *Satyavati* violates the recommendations of dharmshastric discourse in her decision. She plays a central role in taking the lineage of *Vichitravirya* forward. All the important decisions are taken and their execution is carried out by *Satyavati* instead of the male members of the family, which is contrary to the standards of patriarchy.¹¹ Secondly; the husband's brother has been suggested for the custom of *niyog* in *dharmshastras*¹². In the absence of brother any equivalent relative of the same clan can execute this job. *Vyas* does not fit in this prescription. Actually her decision and conduct is the reversal of the norms of a patriarchal society which establishes her as an independent woman.

The description of *Amba* comes along with her two younger sisters namely *Ambika* and *Ambalika* at the event of their collective *swayamvar*. They have been said to be the daughters of *Kashi Naresh*, whom *Bhishma* abducted in full glare from their *swayamvar* ceremony. The reason behind the forceful abduction was to get them married with his younger brother *Vichitravirya*.¹³ After reaching *Hastinapur*, the eldest one among the three sisters *Amba* voiced her utter disgust in the protest against this behavior of *Bhishma* and opposed to marrying *Vichitravirya*.¹⁴ The other two got married with *Vichitravirya*.

The detail of the story (legend) of *Amba* is given in the *Udyog Parv*¹⁵. *Amba* distinctly as well as strongly criticizes the practice of *swayamvar* prevalent in the Kshatriya clan where women do not possess the right to select her husband in reality. The reference of *Sita* and *Draupadi* is worth mentioning in this regard. The *swayamvar* of these two most popular heroines of Indian epics were pre-conditioned. It was only possible for someone to marry *Sita* and *Draupadi* who could fulfill the conditions. Basically the *swayamvar* of the heroines of the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* was not their individual choice. *Amba* along with *Bhishma* condemns her father too. While accusing her father *Kashi Naresh* she holds him responsible for her poor condition. She says that, 'women continues to remain a salable commodity, which can be acquired by any powerful chauvinist male.'¹⁶ *Amba's* character is represented not only as fully aware of the violation of women's rights in the patriarchal society, she also opposes it as well. It is altogether a different issue that she could not gain love, affection and trust of the person for whom she revolted. *Shalva*, for whose affection and love she bitterly criticized *Bhishma* and disapproved the proposal of marriage with *Vichitravirya*, that same person *Shalva* disapproved her on returning back. Thus he took the revenge for being defeated by *Bhishma* in the battlefield while protesting against abduction of *Amba*, by out rightly rejecting her. *Amba* with a burning desire of revenge meditated deeply¹⁷ for 12 years and received the boon from *Shiva* to destroy *Bhishma*.¹⁸

Amba's behavior is a complete rebellion against the Dharmshastric norms. At first, in spite of being forcefully abducted she denies her marriage proposal. The provision for this is not permitted in the *dharmshastras*. She decides for in deep meditation in order to revenge the injustice done to her.¹⁹ Along with this decision of hers she escapes the sphere of woman's important duties and main objectives of life such as getting married and producing child; prescribed in the normative texts. Her desire for revenge is so strong that in order to take revenge against *Bhishma* she invests two births as *Amba* and *Shikhandi*. So, evidently she is not-the preferred one-

of the normative texts. *Hidimba* and *Pradweshi* are the two other important women of the *Adi Parv* in this context. After *Hidimbashur*, the brother of *Hidimba*, being killed by *Bhīma* she urges Kunti to allow her marry *Bhīma* in order to continue her lineage; bearing the condition that, 'she will only have the physical relationship with *Bhīma* until she gives birth to a child, not after that, and thus she chooses *Bhīma*.²⁰

Pradweshi is another assertive and self-respecting woman who appears in the *Adi Parv*. She is the beautiful young wife of *Dirghatmas*. In spite of *Dirghatmas*'s being blind she married him inspired by the intellect of *Dirghatmas*. Despite being well aware of the legitimacy of the custom of *niyog* *Dirghatmas* started involving in such relationships just to seek pleasure, without considering his status and reputation. *Pradweshi* condemned it strongly and expressed her unwillingness to look after him.²¹

In the *Anushashan Parv*²², *Anusuya* the wife of saint *Atri* is also worth mentioning. She receives the boon from *Shiva* to conceive a male child without the help of (cohabiting) her husband, who will be known by her name and also propagate her clan as well. This reference is important by itself. Though the male child has been considered important in this instance but conceiving him without the biological role of the husband and the progeny carrying forward the clan of his mother stands to be radical enough. In the normative texts, the male child has been told to be someone who takes his father's clan forward and frees him from the debt of his ancestors. Such references of mother-child are not present in the normative texts.

There is a primary description of *Kunti* and *Draupadi* in the *Adi Parv*. However both these women are not limited to the *Adi Parv*, rather they occupy the center stage in the whole story of the *Mahabharata*. These two female characters are extremely complicated. Although being self-assertive to an extent they are often witnessed to be behaving according to the *Dharmshastric* instructions while adhering to the standards of patriarchy.

The political aspiration of *Kunti* as the mother of *Pandavas* is quite strong. She can be found to be unrelentingly working to fulfill these aspirations while staying within the limits of patriarchy. *Kunti*'s non-acknowledgement of *Karn* in public²³, accepting *Pandu* as husband in spite of his impotency²⁴, jealousy and rivalry towards co-wife *Madri* regarding her husband and children²⁵, mounting the charge of *Pandu*'s death on *Madri*²⁶, accompanying *Dhritarashtra* and *Gandhari* to *vanprastha* in order to serve him after the battle of *Kurukshetra*²⁷; shows *Kunti* as an ideal woman of the patriarchal society.

Making *Draupadi* the wife of her five sons²⁸, the attempt to persuade *Karn* emotionally to fight on behalf of the *Pandavas*²⁹, relentlessly encouraging *Yudhishthir* for the battle³⁰, consistently reminding *Draupadi* about her humiliation³¹ etc. portrays her as a politically ambitious, diplomatic woman. In spite of being assertive in some instances, the character of *Kunti* never shows much deviation from the standards of patriarchy.

Draupadi is the heroine of the epic. Her brilliance is quite attractive. Lots of ups and downs can be found in the texture of her character. The distinct feature of her character is that she does not consider her humiliation as her fate. She holds her husbands responsible for her plight³². In her conversation with *Krishna*, while claiming herself as *nathvati-anathvat* (apparently much guarded by husbands, yet in

reality like an orphan) she denounces that 'neither I have any husband, nor son, nor brother and not even any relatives. O' *Madhusudan*, even you are not my well-wisher because you too kept watching my humiliation done by *Kauravas* as a mute spectator.³³ The anger out of humiliation done in the full public glare rendered *Draupadi* so much helpless that she termed the *Pandavas* as a coward.

There is another side of this heroine's dynamic character. On one hand, not opposing the distribution among five husbands in spite of *Arjuna's* successfully winning her by fulfilling the condition laid in the *svayamvar*³⁴, her role as a dutiful housewife³⁵ in the *Vanparv* showcases her as a virtuous woman with qualities like dedication, sacrifice and humbleness. While on the other she sometimes emerges as much a very cruel heartless woman, to take the revenge of her humiliation *Bhīma* had torn open the heart of *Duhshasan*. At times we find her as an arrogant woman too.

Basically the characterizing composition of the female characters of the *Mahabharata* is diverse enough. Along with the self-assertive female characters mentioned above there are several soft spoken female characters who assert their presence in the story. These soft spoken female characters are high in numbers. This is also quite normal because the main plot of the *Mahabharata* is woven on the framework of the patriarchal society. Though in smaller number the above mentioned self-assertive female characters attract our attention and make us conclude that the story of *Mahabharata* is not the story of any monolithic society. Much like the diversity of characterization of woman, the society of the times had also assimilated various cultural variations in itself. Violation of social norms prescribed in the theology, deviation from the standard code of conduct by women, characteristic distinctions among the females are the evidences of the existence of different social units with cultural uniqueness's. Some social units were not under the guidelines of the *dharmshastric* realm and thus independent from that. That is why some female characters of the *Mahabharata* are found to be freed from the grip of patriarchy and aware of their identity. Different social environments of the women described above also provide the basis for this conclusion. *Shakuntala* and *Devyani* are the daughters of ascetics, *Pradweshi* and *Atri* are ascetic's wives, *Sharmistha* and *Hidimba* belong to the *Ashur* culture whereas *Satyavati* is the daughter of *Nishad* (on the basis of her upbringing). The environment of all these characters are out of the purview of the '*Aryan society*'. On the other hand *Amba*, *Kunti*, *Draupadi* are the integral part of '*Aryan society*'. Though *Kunti* and *Draupadi* are quite self-assertive, they never dared the standards of patriarchy with enough zeal and perseverance like *Amba*. The challenges thrown by *Amba* are the most notable one.

It is evident from the various vibrant female characters and their conduct that in ancient times only a limited section of the society in limited contexts behaved and lived according to the normative texts, and that should not be understood as the reflection of the whole society. Cultural diversity was the uniqueness and reality of ancient India. The characterization of *Kunti* and *Draupadi* hints that, in patriarchy one is not a virtuous woman who is faithful to a single man rather she is the one who sacrifices the right of controlling her own sexuality as the daughter and wife and the right to self-determination to the male members of the family like the father, husband

and son. The patriarchy is always chauvinistic towards the independent picture of woman. This is at the root of all evil.

Reference:

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- [3] The *Mahabharata*, Volume I, The Book of Beginning, *Adi Parv*, Chapter-62-69, University of Chicago, 1973; Concise *Mahabharata*, First Part, *Adi Parv*, Geeta Press, Gorakhpur, Page 33-36, 27th Edition.
- [4] Concise *Mahabharata*, First Part, *Adi Parv*, Geeta Press, Gorakhpur, 27th Edition pp. 38-9.
- [5] Concise *Mahabharata*, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, pp. 42-4
- [6] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, The *Mahabharata* of Krishna Dwaipayana Vyas, Volume I, Munshiram Monahar Lal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2004, *Adi Parv*, p. 126
- [7] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, p. 227
- [8] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, pp. 217-18
- [9] One of the twelve kinds of children, *Manu Smriti*, IX. 160; *Vishnu Smriti*, XV.10; *Vrihashpati Smriti*, XXV.41; *Vashisht Dharmasutra*, XVII-21
- [10] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, pp. 222-28
- [11] *Vashisht Dharmasutra*, XVII-56, It is mentioned in this *Dharmasutra* that, 'the male members of the family had the right to take decisions regarding the custom of *niyog*. Six months after the death of the deceased, the male members of the family used to decide with the general consent of their relatives, *kul-guru* of the clan and the family priest that when and through whom the act of *niyog* could be performed on the wife of deceased.'
- [12] *Gautama Dharmasutra*, XVIII; *Yajnavalk Smriti*, III, 68-69
- [13] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, pp. 219-21, This kind of marriage has been termed as *Rakshas* marriage in the *Dharmashastra**and *Manu***has mentioned it permissible for the *Kshatriyas*. **Manusmriti*, III-27-37; *Vishnu Smriti*, XXIV.17-34; *Gautam Smriti*, IV; *Narad Smriti* XII, 38.39 ***Manu*, III-23-36
- [14] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, pp. 221-22, Concise *Mahabharata*, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, pp. 54-6
- [15] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Udyog Parv*, pp.336-37, 345-46.
- [16] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Udyog Parv*, pp. 337-38
- [17] The *Mahabharata*, Sukthankar (Edited), 1933-69, *Udyog Parv*, 5.170-197; *Bhism Parv*, 6.103-114; Concise *Mahabharata*, *ibid*, *Udyog Parv*, pp. 569-78
- [18] This is against the provision made by *Manu*, *Vishnu* and *Parashar* in his memories. It has been said in these *smritis* that the service to the husband done by a woman is equivalent to the hardest meditation done by her. She can excel

- only through the services given to her husband, not through the power of meditation. *Manu*, X.155; *Vishnu*, XXIV.7, 15; *Parashar*, IV.20
- [19] Normative texts do not permit women to practice meditation; See, Reference No.-18
- [20] Concise *Mahabharata*, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, Page 83-89; Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Adi Parv*, pp. 322-24
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- [22] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, *Anushasan Parv*, Part I, Page 43
- [23] Concise *Mahabharata*, *ibid*, *Van Parv*, pp. 393-95
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- [30] Ganguly, Keshari Mohan, *ibid*, Volume IV, *Udyog Parv*, section CXXXII, pp.252-62
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