

Thinking Back Through Our Mothers: Female Heroes of Mahabharata

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*Yada Yada Hi Dharmasya
Ghanirva Bhavati Bharata,
Abhuthanam Adharmasya
Tadatmanam Srijami Aham.
Bhagwat Gita, Ch- IV- 7*

Lord Krishna lessoned Arjuna with the above lines when the latter faced a moral dilemma while he stood in the battlefield of Kurukshetra as to whether take up arms against his own kinsmen and gurus or not. However, it would be far way deceptive to assume that Sri Krishna was the only supernatural and strong-willed force behind the authentication of dharma for Kuru princes. In other words, this four line fragment is not just a factual information demarcating a rotten and unhealthy phallogocentric world but a comparative manifesto which needs to be deciphered as a poem of female heroism, an age-old yet a postmodern saga of feminine articulation operating at the heart of mythological genesis. Therefore, the research attempts to construct the unwritten part of the poem with creative perceptions and acknowledgements that further enables a reader to accentuate the epic in a new light. In addition, the theological prerequisite to this primary idea is the presence of female forces of power and assertion across the epic line. This insightful contemplation begins by questioning the one sidedness of the above mentioned lines.

Was it only the phallic inspiration at work in order to establish righteousness in the Dvapara yuga of irreligion? In both Indian and Western mythological traditions, binary forces existed together in order to procreate a new age. Eve was created for Adam both for terrestrial and sexual regeneration, Parvati both with respect to power and psychological perception were one with Shiva thereby forming a coalition of ardhnarishvara. Therefore, in Mahabharata too Sri Krishna was not alone in the task of cleansing unrighteousness but there was a presence of catalytic feminine Shakti which was constantly there at work.

One of the foremost character representative of this shakti was the demi - goddess Draupadi. From the womb of sacrificial fire, she emerged fully grown into the world of humans. This sensational womb was metaphoric of her physical, articulatory and psychological nature which reverberated throughout the epic poem. Her supernatural birth was accompanied by a predestined oracle that emblemized her as a destructive force which will burn the Kshatriya race in her rage and vengeance. She incarnated the aspects of goddess Kali, who demanded the blood of her enemies in order to conquer her revengeful hatred. Lotus eyed Krishna glorified as Yasasvini; she was an “arc - kshatriya whose energy engenders her own self destruction” (McGarth, 2009, p. 117-135). Such was her fiery nature which hailed her as a heroic princess, unattainable by the enemies and whoever aspired to grasp this fire was burnt down to ashes. This

fire was subsequently cooled down when she was undertaking her last journey with the Pandavas. Her death on the icy Himalayas validates this fact. All her rage got melted in ice when she was taking her last breathes.

On the day of her swayamvara, she was described as the “perfect beauty” (Rajgopalachari, 2009, p. 69) that exhorted speechless admiration among the audience. But on the other hand, she also represented queenly pride, female arrogance and assertiveness of speech. This can be exemplified in the way she rejected Karna as a suitor in the swayamvara when he came forward to try his luck. (However, she did so on the initiation of Sri Krishna thereby affirming a higher destiny prescribed to her. Also there existed a Platonized friendship between the two). She retorted against his low caste position, appellated him as a mere sutputra and refused him as a husband even if he won. In a sense, she was haughty and proud of her royal descent. Arjuna disguised as a brahmana won her but her marriage was sanctified with all five Pandavas. She was tied in wedlock separately with each of the brothers. Moreover, after this wedlock the Pandavas negated their brahminical disguise and became recognized with their true identities and royal princely status. Here Draupadi can be associated with sri (lakshmi) as she brought back the lost pride of Pandavas, when they won the archery test. Not only pride but now she was also their passport to Hastinapur where they could try to reclaim their rights as now they were not alone, they had strong allies on their side.

However, her destiny was not a favorable one. In the Sabha Parva of the epic, she was publicly humiliated by Dushasana who dragged her forcibly by her tresses in the court of men. Clad in a single piece of cloth and menstruating, she courageously tried to enforce the morality of Kshatriya dharma among the men who emanated silence with respect to trickery and wrongdoings imposed on the Pandava clan as well as the verbal molestation that their daughter in law suffered from. She assertively raised her voice against the game of trickery which stooped her husbands to the level of slavery. She was undeterred even in such a desperate time which again strengthens and validates her associations with fire. She carried fire in her speech which was reflected in her question to Dharmaraja

“Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?” (The Mahabharata Ed. J.A.B. Van Buitenen, 2008, p. 41).

This question of hers remained unanswered throughout the whole epic. Scholars and critics worldwide have commented on the silence of the senior Pandava as an act of preservation of dharma. But at the same time Draupadi’s right to retort in the sabha of men has been problematized and therefore a topic of much debate. Ranging from Karve’s “lady pundit” (Karve 1994, p. 107-13) to Hildebeital’s (2001) clever queen, her courage has been reframed and reoriented by the twentieth century readings but as an active reader one can contemplate the philosophized depth of her argument which was responsible for the subsequent emancipation of her husbands as well as herself. In other words, he epitomized the spirit of both anima and animus as analyzed by C.S Jung. In addition to this, her humiliation was a sexual one where her untied tresses and stained robe (symbol of upcoming destruction) in a state of disrobing act as sexual assault (the metaphor of robes was again repeated after thirteen years in Virata’s court when the disguised Arjuna presented princess Uttara with colorful robes thereby symbolizing a regenerative purpose which was fulfilled with the birth of Parikshit later on) with and Duryodhana’s exposure of his bare thigh acts as a phallic symbol which Bhima broke subsequently. She suffered all this with a heroic spirit that gradually resulted in her miraculous robing and protection which further affirmed her connection with the supernatural. Yet she never forgot this doomed day which

enraged her every minute henceforth. She left the Sabha with untied hair and stained garments emblematic of widowhood, the fate of Kaurava queens fourteen years thereafter.

A similar situation was again faced by Draupadi when she and the Pandavas resided at Virata's kingdom in incognito. Kichaka dragged her in the assembly

“And kicked her in the presence of all with abusive words”. This scene was reminiscent of the earlier sabha and here again her two senior husbands were silent at her humiliation as their disguise was in jeopardy. Draupadi departed with the following words

“I, extremely virtuous am in the service of those who are compassionate!” (McCarthy, 2009, p. 117-153).

Here, once again her husbands failed to provide her with public protection. If one aims to linguistically interpret the crisp statements of Draupadi, they are an ocean in themselves which carry a profound meaning when deciphered thereby forming a speech act essentially feminist. Yet this heroic princess was destined to an unheroic death. She died on ice in isolation from the courtly world.

Another female character who was Draupadi's equivalent in terms of verbal strength and decisive articulation, a matriarchal figure in the Pandava household was Kunti. Matriline predominated in the birth of the Pandavas (through the convention of levirate) and a specimen of it can be observed in Bhima's revelation of his identity to his swift brother Hanuman. He said “I 'am a Kshatriya hero, a descendent of Kuru race and a son of Kunti” (Rajagopalachari, 2009, p.159). This statement aligned him to the matriline preponderance. Her authority was also highlighted during her instructive stipulation of dharma to her sons while their stay in the forest and her model of good kingship in Udyog Parva cannot be ignored. Her assertiveness to abandon Karna and concealing it till the end was typical of her primary concern which was the “welfare of the dynastic line of Pandu” (Chaitanya 1985, p.152-159). Moreover, it was her intelligence that allowed her to summon Dharma first which was assuring of her actions accompanied by legitimization of levirate.

She played a pivotal role in sanctifying the marriage of Draupadi to each of the five Pandavas. She “with her motherly instincts read her sons desire to go to Panchala and win Draupadi” (Rajagopalachari, 2009, p. 68). This decision of hers was not inadvertent but a planned strategy as it solved a dual purpose, to align the Pandavas with a common wife (symbol of unity) and to be supported by strong allies. In other words, Draupadi became a junior Kunti who during their exile in the forest performed the motherly functions, one of which was to win back the throne of Hastinapura. Also, Kunti was the one who engaged Krishna into the allegiance who inspired righteousness to victory (that Pandavas carried more). Just for the welfare of her sons, she swallowed her pride and approached Karna with reality and instigated him to join the Pandavas to which he refused. To him, she said “Son, all the Kauravas will be destroyed in the battle. Let it be as you say. Who can fight fate” (Karve 1994, p.67-86.) Like Draupadi's speech act, this statement too is a tangled one that propagated a higher truth. Other than a selfish instigation, it can be contemplated as her desire to protect Karna from a certain providence that she was unable to do. However, she enabled him to promise not to slay any of his sons except Arjuna. This was the intelligent articulative technique of Kunti. But at the end, she decided to serve her elders in the forest and there itself she was burnt down to death in the forest fire.

The war at Kurukshetra contributed to the immense plight and suffering in the Kuru clan especially among the female folk. Abhimanyu along with Draupadi's young sons were slayed

down in battle. But the female character who incurred the loss of lives at the utmost level was Gandhari. The gory battle swallowed all her sons. In the whole epic poem, she can be termed as the silent female sufferer but there are glimpses of heroism in her silence itself. She was betrothed to a blind king whose kingdom was more financially powerful than that of her father's. Unlike Draupadi whose rage was outburstive, Gandhari's anger was sustained to her self especially predominated by her eyes which she blinded with a cloth in order to be in concordance with her husband. Her submerged wrath was emblematic of her psychic power which when released will burn "the three worlds with her terrific heat" (McGarth 2009, p. 95-100). This destructive aspect was reflected in her minimal slant gaze which caused Yudhishtira's toe to burn.

Drithrashtra's physical blindness was the moral one but this was not true in the case of Gandhari. Vyasa favored her with divine insight and therefore like the poet Samjaya she was able to visualize the battle. This was the primary field of her heroism. Moreover, she too was the source of Dharmic inspiration though not recognized. Unlike Kunti, who carried out both matriarchal authority and wifely assertiveness, in the case of Gandhari not only the Kauravas paid a deaf ear to their mother's wailings with respect to making peace with the Pandavas but Drithrashtra too dismissed her warnings about the fatal prophecy that concerned the ruin of the clan with the birth of Duryodhana and called back the Pandavas for the second game of dice. That is why whenever Duryodhana came to seek her blessings she just said "only where righteousness is, victory be" (Chaitanya 1985, p. 159-163). This statement is another specimen of profound verbiology thereby highlighting an eternal truth as well as an unalterable providence.

She also carried in herself the power to curse which she was about to exercise on the Pandavas but with the intervention of Vyasa, she was dissuaded not to do so. However, her anger flared up at Krishna and she cursed the destruction of his clan thirty six years thereafter. But Krishna's reply to her waved aside the authentication of her curse but rather transformed it into a mere prophecy thereby highlighting the great predestined web. Altogether, in spite of the subalternic position stipulated to her, she was successful in constructing an individual personality of her own that casts her worthy as a female heroine in the epic poem. But she too like Kunti was consumed by the forest fire thereby putting an end to all her sufferings.

These epistemizations that an active reader undergoes empowers the epic poem with gynecology typically vibrant. It is the female characters who carry the reins of true heroism. Unlike the male characters, who proudly boast of their strength in the battlefield and practice rhetoric which is abusive and insulting, the speech acts of women are firm in content, an epitome of what is worthwhile and also clever enough whenever required for the immediate welfare. Such was the role played by Satyawati, the senior most queen of Mahabharata. It was through her decisive assertion that we know the epic of what it is today. She transcended the limitations of her low birth by becoming the Bharata queen.

Her most pivotal role came into picture when her son Vichitravirya died without producing a legitimate heir. This was the crucial time when she revealed to Bhisma about her son Vyasa from rishi Parashar before her marriage and decided to call him in order to impregnate her daughter in laws. Therefore, unlike Kunti who concealed the identity of Karna for the welfare of the Pandava clan, Satyawati on the other hand revealed her truth in order to unparalyse the genetic situation. However, though both the queens undertook the direction opposite to one another but their purpose was much the same. Such were the

clever techniques of the Bharata queens. With this decision of hers, there arrived a predominance of matriline in the clan. Thus, Satyawati along with Ambika and Ambalika were left to restore the Bharata race (this purpose of restoration was continued by Kunti, Draupadi and finally by the youngest queen Uttara later on). (Dhand, 2004) Subsequently with the birth of blind Drithrashtra and pale Pandu, the seeds of enmity were sowed followed by power politics for the throne. Before the seeds of enmity grew into thorn bearing plants, Vyasa advised his mother along with her daughter in laws to take residence in the forest.

Therefore, it was the female characters who took timely decisive actions not only with respect to their reproductive consciousness but also as embodiments of inspirational wives and mothers. Also, the gory megalomania came into picture with the advent of matriline and the battle was fought between the sons of patriline (the Kauravas) and the sons of matriline (the Pandavas) in which the matrilineal sons were crowned with victory. However, this victory was futile especially for Yudhishtira whose soul was not at peace by the killings of his own brothers and with the grief of his elders. That is the reason why the epic terminated not just after the war but in the heaven when “ he saw there Karna, and all his brothers, and the sons of Dritarashtra also, serene and free from anger, all having attained the state of gods. In this reunion, Yudhishtira at last found peace and real happiness ” (Rajagopalachari, 2009, p.444).

This reunion is representative of the primary assertion that was formulated right in the beginning, the existence of binary forces. Just as the two destructive Shaktis in order to restore a new yuga exist together similarly, the final peace arrives when the sons of mariline got reunited with the patrilineal sons. Therefore, a reader through the process of active reading is able to create a new epic poem without obliteration of scripted statements. In other words, the study emphasizes that femininity is not killed but it exists throughout, it is a submerged force that needs to be extracted out of the phallogocentric dominion in order to deconstruct the prevalent dichotomies of heroism and emancipate the female (who is often the subject of least interest) so as to accentuate her importance in the contemporary society

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