

# ‘One is not Born but (Rather) Becomes a Woman’: Glimpses of *Mahabharata* through the lens of Women Studies

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## Introduction

Simon De Beauvoir’s influential statement “one is not born but becomes a woman”, an important statement/realisation in the domain of patriarchy, shook the world compelling it to ponder over the very essence of women. Male intellectuals have constructed such essentialism with the help of discourse, state apparatuses and the local machineries to sustain and perpetuate male supremacy in the society. Various discourses- religious, cultural, social, political, and the like have played a vital role in the process of constructing women as born with these essential qualities. Along with a prescribed set of rules and norms in the society, these discourses very tactfully have supplemented different narratives so that women could imbibe these qualities right from their birth. Narratives of the religious discourses, the most effective and successful tools and also the storehouse of different everyday life stories have grappled (in)directly with the Hindu women’s life and have prominently and actively participated in the process of constructing the very essence and identity of the Hindu women. That is to say, stories that have grappled with the life of women in the religious discourses like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have reflected upon the everyday life of the Hindu women and the same has been replicated in the actual world.

My study will focus on the way one of the greatest epics of the world the *Mahabharata* has been instrumental in the process of constructing Hindu women. To do so, I shall rely on Foucauldian formulations like- discourse, discursive and non-discursive machineries, norm, and the like.

## Revisiting the *Mahabharata*

When looked at the *Mahabharata* from the perspective of women as a discourse and storehouse of a Hindu way of life and worldview, we are confronted by questions such as: ‘Why did the narrators narrate different stories along with the main plot of ‘rise and fall’ of Bharata Vansha or Kuru Dynasty?’, ‘Why were the women placed at the receiving end?’, ‘What were the reasons behind marginalizing women in general?’ and ‘How had marginalization impacted the Hindu ways of life?’.

The *Mahabharata*, though attributed to one hand (Vyasa- the narrator or at least the compiler of the epic into eight thousand slokas or verses) is narrated by different persons throughout history. Due to the re-editing and the additions of more slokas (ranging from twenty-five thousand to one lakh) by the Bhrgu Dynasty, complexities and complications are affixed to

the women characters of the *Mahabharata* which again have undergone changes according to the needs of the narrators to further easily channelize the male preeminence in the society. The roots of such changes can be traced back to two hundred BCE to the production and the aftermath of the influential seminal work, *Manusmṛti* by Manu. It was the time when complexities and complications in terms of social values, social norms, customs, rituals, and Hindu ways of life started taking place. Male-dominance started strengthening its roots firmly and patriarchy took its charge coercively. The seminal epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, have been re-narrated with a view to uphold the renewed patriarchal values, customs, rituals and the like. During the time of such transformation, the role of women had been adjusted merely as the keeper at the receiving end of the repository of renewed patriarchy. The portrayal of women characters based on her behaviour in the *Mahabharata* too had been reintroduced with the added qualities. She had but only two things to do- giving birth and warming the hearth. Evidently, this dependability is the result of Manu-effect with his declaration, “पिता रक्षति कौमरे भर्ता रक्षति यवना | पुत्रः रक्षति वार्धक्ये न स्त्री स्वतन्त्र्य मर्हति ||” (*Manusmṛti*, 9/3) (Meaning: she should be taken care of and her freedom to be infringed right from her birth by her male partners: father, husband, and son).

Another reason to give a fresh revisit to the *Mahabharata* is that the projection of microcosm of Hindu life at the surface level in the *Mahabharata* has been composed keeping in mind two politically charged principles: constructing the image of woman as “*Ghar ki Lakshmi*” or as an “Ideal woman” and as an “angel in the house”; and also to create an alter ego for the male participant in the male-dominated patriarchal system in order to legitimize male supremacy and dominance. To do so, it was necessary to construct their (male) counterpart (i.e. woman) as “secondary” as far as their role and status are concerned; as “marginal” at the endorsement of the social ladder; and as “other” while asserting the dominant prominent role. At this juncture, the upholders of male-dominance have made use of two weapons- stigmatization and inclusion- to pacify the women and to normalize the concept of “*Ghar ki Lakshmi*”. Imitating the life of epic characters is regarded to be following the God’s and Goddesses’ ways of life and deviating from such practices are believed to be inauspicious. This provision is again supported by the sacred book *Lakshmi Puran* composed again by Bhrigu which says that one who follows the given patriarchal customs, norms, and rituals obediently without questioning is called *Lakshmi* (equal to or like Goddess *Lakshmi* and Goddess *Lakshmi* herself resides in her and in that family) and who does not is stigmatized as *Ku-Lakshmi*. In order to avoid such stigmatization and to get included into the Hindu society, the Hindu women had fallen prey to the patriarchal system and hence, were allured by the epithet as “*ghar ki Lakshmi*” or “angel in the house”. Their existence had been trapped into the scriptural context by the dual system of fear of stigmatization (*Ku-Lakshmi*) and desire to be obedient (*Lakshmi*). They strived hard to be called as “*ghar ki Lakshmi*” than to be stigmatized. Consequently, to confirm the prevailing social system, women fall prey to such temptations and got caught in the patriarchal modus operandi: inclusion and stigmatization. In addition to this, due to the craving for getting worshipped like the mythical characters Sita, Savitri, Draupadi, Kunti, Mandodari etc., the Hindu women started imitating, following, and internalising all the constructed ideas, values, rituals, customs associated with such great mythical women characters of the Indian epics.

The weapon of stigma is employed to nullify the physical, emotional, and moral potency. All the aggressive, strong, and noticeable qualities are nullified through stigmatizing its very existence by creating stories all along to show how the mythical women characters have discarded them and harboured other less powerful, weaker constructed qualities as essential for them. Therefore, the whole range of politics of marginalizing a woman in general took place to make a

woman an ideal being or angel in the house who can resist more in vain, oppose no more openly, remain in houses, take care of household things, take care of children and her in-laws, be as the well-trained docile being, be faithful to him, obey him and so on.

### The Process of Becoming

Epics were instrumental in the discourses that led to the process of marginalizing women. They were the storehouses of different codes of conduct, ways of life, rituals, cultural practices, beliefs, customs, etc. of Hindu(ism). There were different mechanisms in this process. On the one hand, there were the operators like Manu and Brighu instrumental in the process. And on the other hand, there were women, the counterparts of the operators at the receiving end who were manipulated, marginalized, subsidized, and even subjugated by the male dominant society. For example, the women characters from the epics such as Sita, Mandodari, Draupadi, Renuka, Satyawati, Amba, Savitri, Shakuntala, and the like whose lives are depicted in such a simplistic, mundane and everyday manner that the women in the real world would hardly distinguish themselves from the lifestyle and the daily habitual actions of these characters which is why these characters have strongly influenced the real world Hindu women who have sought to replicate epic character's lifestyle and daily habits in their day-to-day life.

Indian epics were instrumental in the process of marginalization. In the process, power, as Foucault puts it, is conceptualized through the various discourses at the central level and is being exerted at the local level through discursive and non-discursive machineries. Complications and complexities of the discourses like the *Mahabharata* in the process of marginalization lie in the very narration of the story. The operators, Brighu in case of the *Mahabharata*, of such process very consciously jotted down the stories, dialogues with the subtle selection and also very meticulously and minutely presented the everyday activities so that the imitation of such practices should go with no difficulty.

The thirty-eighth chapter, Anushasan Parva ("Stri Swabhav Kathanam") narrates a prejudicial, biased swabhava or nature of women to Yudhishtira which shows the discernment of the narrators where he wanted to know about the nature of women in general from Bhishma but the biased formation of the question leads the reader or listener to an intentionally prejudiced goal of labelling a woman as faulty. Bhishma is considered to be one of the wisest persons in the *Mahabharata* even after the Kurukshetra war was kept alive for different reasons by the narrators. The purpose of marginalizing women was one of those which were done in the most part of the "Anushasan Parva". Yudhishtira could have asked the question straightforwardly like, "Bhishma, could you please tell me the nature of a woman in general?" but instead of a simplistic, straightforward question, Brighu narrators made him ask the question regarding the nature of a woman with the politically charged up question, "Hey, greatest of all Bharata vansha, I wish to know about a woman's nature from you. Grandpa, a woman's treacherous nature is the root of all the adversities in the world." To further reiterate a woman's faithlessness, narrators not only made Yudhishtira question inappropriately, but they also made Bhishma affirm its reliability through an anecdote. It is insignificant to mull over the question of which character from the *Mahabharata* is participating in the discussion. Whether it is a question or an answer, the insertion of a woman's infidelity into the Hindu minds is to sideline, marginalize, and pacify them in the society was one of the prime motifs of the narrators. The characters are chosen to discuss such issues like a woman's nature or other qualities which are merely instrumental so are the

discourses like the *Mahabharata*. What lies at the heart of the discussion of such constructive notions is the narrative act “of subjugating women” in general.

While elaborating about a woman being the root of all adversity and her natural or innate contaminated nature, Bhrigu narrators support their claim by referring to the other scriptural texts such as *Puranas*, narrated by one of the Bhrigus. They take the help of Pouranik or mythical characters such as Narada and Panchachuda. Panchachuda, on Narada’s insistence, starts telling the universal and innate qualities that a woman in general possesses. It is actually Bhrigus who spoke in the guise of Panchachuda who says that the almighty God Himself created women flawed by nature on the day of creation. A woman irrespective of any caste, creed, colour, or religion is the root of all the adversity, calamity, and ill-happenings of the family, community, and nation. That is to say due to the natural traits like frailty, despite being well bred, well nurtured and hailing from a well-cultured family, a woman can be lured by man. If a man succeeds to tempt her, or is chivalrous or loves her or shows the readiness to do anything for her, she falls prey to him. This is the way Panchachuda tells the general truth about a woman’s contaminated nature. In order to make Hindu woman believe in this “constructed nature”, Bhrigus have taken the help of *Puranas* and even gods.

In order to reiterate a woman’s faithlessness, narrators have deliberately sidelined other significant characteristics of a woman’s nature. They have spoken in the guise of Panchachuda so that there would not be any further doubt in minds of the listeners or readers regarding a woman’s faithlessness. Had it been a man talking about a woman’s faithless nature, there would have had some scope for the readers or listeners to find the discussion faulty but when a celestial nymph-like Panchachuda talks about the delicate matters like infidelity as an essential, however constructed it may be, inner quality of a woman, listeners ought to believe in such allegations. The whole range of arguments I am trying to make is that in the process of marginalization, operators like Bhrigu (in order to legitimize a woman’s faithlessness as a universal truth which must be accepted by every Hindu woman which they succeeded when women at the receiving end accepted it as general truth and as an essential part of their nature, internalized and finally acted upon it accordingly) with the help of the discourses like the *Mahabharata* implanted the constructive idea as part of a woman’s innate nature which further observed by the discursive machineries like family system and community whether it is being put into the daily habitual action by women or not in the real world.

The depiction of different women characters presented them with all the traits of a very common woman who survives amidst all the oddities. Such narratives were presented with the latent political ideology to be implanted in the hearts and the minds of common women. With the intention that a common woman associates herself with these characters, narrators have tried to develop different stories in order to install the constructive notions as if they are innate to her. For example, in the “Aranyaka Parva” (chapter 277-283) Yudhishtira asks Markandeya Rishi, “Is there any ‘Pativrata’ (faithful) woman like Draupadi?” Here narrators diplomatically and successfully tried to insert the constructive notion of woman’s faithfulness as an essential part of an ideal woman. That is to say, though women are unfaithful by nature they can attain faithfulness, as Savitri proved her faithfulness even after Yamraj, god of death, offered her different boons which she ultimately denied in order to get back her husband alive from his clutches. The narrator intended to proclaim that though women are unfaithful by nature, they can attain faithfulness if they don’t fall prey to any kind of enticement. So to be an “ideal woman” or “*ghar ki Lakshmi*”, a woman should follow the paths of Savitri for which every year she observes a daylong fasting and worships Savitri so that she too can attain the faithfulness towards her

husband. In order to avoid the constructed stigma of innate unfaithfulness and also to be called as a faithful woman or "*ghar ki Lakshmi*", an ideal woman believed in the story of Savitri and Satyavana and observed fasting, worshipping Savitri and praying for the long life of her husband and her in-laws. In order to make them believe in this cultural ritual there was, on the one hand, the story of Savitri and her attainment of faithfulness as a discourse at the broader level and on the other hand, different discursive machineries like family, society and discursive practices like showing the importance of observing fast on the days of "*karva chaut*" and "*vat pournima*" through the various Television serials like- "*Iss Pyar Ko Kya Naam Doon*", or through Indian movies like "*Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Ghum*" and the songs like "*Vaat Pahate Punvechi*" and the like, have worked meticulously and minutely by observing, and providing enough amount of space to perform these rituals.

The *Mahabharata* is instrumentally exercised as a discourse. One of its purposes is to produce constructive concepts, definitions, ideologies and terminologies to be prescribed, meditated on and followed in the real world. Each woman character is the prototype and is stigmatized initially so that the character can undergo moral reformation by means of following rituals and practices laid down by the narrators over the period of time. Each of them was presented with some added qualities. They were shown as impure by nature with the possibility of purification if they observe certain socio-cultural rituals and practices in their daily lives. The story of Madhavi (story of Madhavi appears in *Mahabharata* "Udyog Parva" chapter 104-121), daughter of Yayati, is told by Narada in order to nullify woman from being stubborn to an obedient kind. According to Chitra Shashtri, "[T]his story of Madhavi is spun to iterate the saying 'a woman too can fulfill the aims of family (that is Uddhar karne)'. This was the main reason for spinning this story.

Through the Shakuntala character ("Aadi Parva" chapters- 62-69), narrators wanted to convey the message from the mouth of Kanva Rishi to his daughter or to all the women in general that a woman should not stay at her paternal home for a long time after her marriage, if she continues staying, it defiles their religion, name, and fame. This play of defilement and curse always haunted women and made them feel vulnerable and helpless. Shakuntala's question "Why is it so that always a woman is labelled and compelled to suffer for all the happening in the world?" hints at the muffled displeasure. Damyanti's ("Aranyaka Parva" chapter 49-78) voice remains unnoticed after her husband Nala deserts her all alone in the jungle. Questions like- "Being dutiful and honest how can you leave me all alone in an unknown forest like this that too when I am asleep?"; and "How can you do this to me when I am loyal and obedient to you and at the same time when there is no mistake of mine?"; or the worries like- "enough of this hide and seek! I know you must have hidden somewhere here. Please come to me. I am frightened of such games."- went unnoticed. In this story, language too played its part in the process of marginalization. Privileging the male language by epic composers and narrators is apparently seen in the character Dushyanta who besides blaming Shakuntala's child (whose father is Dushyanta himself) as the son of a prostitute denies Shakuntala as his wife and rather calls her a liar and an offspring of a prostitute. As the story runs, listeners or the readers can easily find out who the liar is but still, Dushyanta with all the linguistic power denies the truth. On the contrary, Shakuntala was given a very limited amount of linguistic expressions. Throughout the Dushyanta's allegations, she speaks softly, pleadingly, and with reverence. The clear and evident linguistic discrimination indicates the path towards the common understanding that even at the time of defending herself from the wrong allegations she was silenced. It is quite unjust not to allow the accused to have a word in defense even if the allegations are correct. Similar incidence can be traced from the other Indian epic the *Ramayana*. When Rama rescues Sita after his victory over

Ravana, he allegedly asks her to prepare herself for the test of faithfulness in which she was compelled to go for the self-immolation test. During this interaction, Sita was attributed with soft-spoken words whereas Rama had the upper hand and dominant role in the exercise. Narrators' intention behind such acts was a simple political operation of silencing women. Even if she is right she should not have a word in defense, if they ask why not to have any word, patriarchy will remind them of the mythical cum godly example of Sita and Shakuntala characters.

## Conclusion

The paper endeavoured to offer a fresh look at certain key narratives of Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. It highlighted the way narrators especially Bhrguis intended to make the Hindu women obedient beings through the internalization of constructed essential qualities that made them inferior, secondary, marginal with the help of the device of inclusion and stigmatization aligned with the discursive and non-discursive mechanisms. The architects, protectors, and the preservers of the patriarchy to perpetuate male supremacy in the society had compiled and narrated the religious discourses like the *Mahabharata* to construct the self of others who are different from them in terms of caste, creed, and gender. The women being different from the male in terms of gender had fallen prey at the hands of patriarchy to remain marginal perennially.

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