



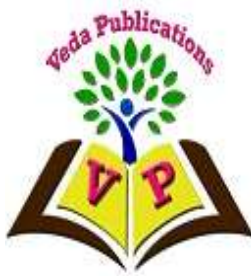
THE FEARLESS FEMINISTS: REVISITING THE FASCINATING WOMEN CHARACTERS OF THE MAHABHARATA

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ABSTRACT



The Mahabharata is remarkable for the portrayal of women characters as strong, bold, fierce and assertive, having independent existence. They are capable of taking their own decisions and are also ready to face the consequences of those decisions. They stood for what they thought right and resisted what according to them was wrong. The way the characters have been portrayed, they can serve as role models for today's feminists. This paper makes an attempt to focus on some of the fearless feminists in this epic. An analysis of major female characters is done for the purpose of the present study.

Keywords: *Epics, Feminists, Scriptures, Taboo, Subjugation.*



INTRODUCTION

Feminism advocates equal social, economic, political rights to women. It discusses the portrayal of gender roles, imposition of social norms, customs, connections, law and expectations on the basis of gender discrimination. A large volume of literature offer insight into the complex issues of women's life, their sufferings as victims of male hegemony. In the Mahabharata the women characters are portrayed as self sufficient women. They have their intense awareness of identity as women and very gracefully they have interacted with feminine problems.

Though the central themes highlight subjugation of women, they have been victorious as fearless feminists and are successful in having their own identities. They are all human beings and have their own shares of problems, dreams and needs. While discussing the women characters particular attention is drawn to psychological insight and existential concerns. We can easily explore the moral strength of all of them and their struggle in creating their own identity. Along with conventional representation of Indian women, the eminent female characters the epic assert their individuality. In Indian patriarchal society, Indian women have always been taught to follow their spouse and family. The journey of the female characters represents all Indian women but they are different in their own ways.

EMINENT FEMALE CHARACTERS IN THE MAHABHARATA

The Mahabharata is an ancient Indian epic where the main story revolves around two branches of a family – the Pandavas and Kauravas – who in the Kurukshetra war, battle for the throne of Hastinapur. It is the longest epic poem ever written and often referred to as an example of righteousness and the victory of good over the evil. There are some exemplary women characters who are the epitome of courage, elegance, beauty and intelligence. They can be taken as ideal examples as to how a woman in today's society must lead her life with courage. Here are some of the women characters in the epic who were modern in their thinking and actions. They did not flinch once before raising their voices against patriarchy.

Ganga was the first wife of King Shantanu. He was mesmerized by her beauty and proposed her for marriage. However, she accepted his proposal on three conditions – he will not ask where she is from, he should never question her actions irrespective of whether they are good or bad and he should stand by her no matter what. If he breaches any of these conditions then she will leave him forever. She as a woman puts forth her own conditions before marrying which is unconventional.

Satyavati, also known as Matsyakanya was the second queen of King Shantanu. When she realized that she cannot have an heir to the throne after her sons had died, she decided her widowed daughter-in-laws Ambika and Ambalika have sexual intercourse with sage Vyasya in order to get an heir. This decision of her was not at all an easy approach looking at the social order in the then society.

Amba was the eldest princess and the daughter of king of Kashi who fell in love with Salva, the king of Saubala and during her swayamwara she decided to put varmala in his neck. However, she was kidnapped by Bhishma along with her two younger sisters Ambika and Ambalika to marry them to his nephew, Vichitravirya. In a royal and extremely patriarchal society a princess dared to fall in love with a king is something which was certainly not common during that age. Amba is an example of what the fury of a wrathful woman could do. She is remembered by her strong and almost fatal determination of revenge.

Kunti was believed to be quite ahead of her time. Bearing a child before marriage was as good as blasphemy during that period. She had Karna, whose father was the Sun God. However, fearing the shame and dishonour that she and her family will have to bear she puts the baby in a basket and flows the basket in the river. Finally, she accepted Karna which required great courage and she had no fear of society then.

Gandhari was the woman who chose to blindfold herself to share the pain of being blind as her husband, Dhritarashtra. Due to this decision, she had acquired power and knowledge. It was said that her gaze was extremely powerful and she had called



for her first born son Duryodhana to come without clothes during the war of Kurukshetra so that she could remove the blindfold and see him and protect him from any harm. In another instance, she saw the toe of Yudhishtira from a little gap of her blindfold and it was charred because she was angry at him for hurting her sons. In many occasions she has displayed her fearless attitude. Gandhari was aware of what is right and what is wrong but she is helpless and passive while she witnessed in justice. But she was always upholding one principle – Victory goes only with Dharma.

Draupadi or Panchali was another woman who defied the norms of the society during that time. Born from a fire-sacrifice of King of Panchal – Drupada, she was prophesied to lead to the end of Drona and the Kauravas. Though nobody asked what she felt about the decision of marrying five brothers, but throughout life she nurtured the relationships gracefully. She questioned an entire assembly of men about the righteousness when Dusshasana was trying to strip her in public. Draupadi is one of the most powerful and compassionate character one would come across in Hindu scriptures. She was intelligent, fearless, loyal, sacrificing and strong woman who stood tall to protect herself during the game of dice and in-depth analysis of her character shows how she emerges as one of the first feminist our scriptures witnessed. Draupadi is a heroine with very few parallels in world literature.

Hidimbi, wife of Bheem and mother of Ghatotkach, deeply loved Bheem and her decision of marrying him did not shake because of the condition laid by Bheem. Hidimbi tricked her brother and Bhima ultimately killed him. She knew what she wanted and he was determined to get it anyhow. In an age where self-sacrificing women were the epitome of women, Hidimbi set an example that it is not wrong to want things for oneself. She was a single mother and never claimed any rights for her son.

Ulupi, the Naga princess who was infatuated by Arjuna and wanted him at any cost. She caused Arjuna to be abducted and put forth the proposal.

Like Hidimbi she wanted to get what she wanted and succeeded too.

Urvashi was a beautiful nymph in Indra's "Darbaar" and was among the most beautiful women of Mahabharata. She loved Arjuna and tried to allure him with her charm, but when he refused her proposal, she got angry and cursed him that he would lose his manhood. Later, Indra mellowed down the curse to losing his manhood only for a year. Although there were many beautiful women, Urvashi was a deadly combination of beauty, pride and prejudice. She was unafraid of confronting her desires and frankly put forth her proposal without hesitation.

Subhadra was the sister of Krishna and Balarama who was kidnapped by Arjuna. Subhadra asserted her choice and wanted to get that choice for which she eloped with Arjuna without hesitation. She did not marry Duryodhan, the favourite disciple of her elder brother Balarama.

Uttaraa was daughter of King Virata, at whose court the Pandavas spent a year in concealment during their exile. She was sister of Prince Uttar. Uttaraa was widowed at a very young age when Abhimanyu was killed in the Kurukshetra war. When Abhimanyu died, Uttaraa tried to burn herself on the pyre of Abhimanyu, but Krishna stopped her from doing so, informing her of her pregnancy. At Last stage of War Ashwathama decided that if he could not end the Pandavas, he would end their lineage. He fired the weapon at Uttaraa's womb, attacking the foetus form of Parikshit. Krishna intervened and revived the stillborn baby, giving Parikshit his name. At a very young age she took the great responsibility of keeping the Pandava dynasty alive.



CONCLUSION

Thus, the Mahabharata shows a variety of traits of and attitudes towards women. These women were ahead of their time and were bold enough to put forth their voices against the male dominating society. Some women characters in the Mahabharata are frank and bold in their demand of sexual happiness which has been a taboo in Indian tradition. These characters teach us the greatest lessons of life of how to be outspoken, courageous, faithful and devoted.

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