



THE UNSUNG QUEENS: DRAUPADI AND URUVI BY

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the conflicting state of women from India's past and the way it has been recreated in the form of novel by Sharath Kommarraju and Kavita Kane. How these authors have made an effort to answer these questions and to conclude a proper definition to the idea of an independent woman, who wants to build her own identity and has the power to assert herself when the story is retold through her eyes. And how refolding the mythology from a woman's perspective can change the perspective of the people towards women in the present-day society.

Key Words: Orality, Mahabharat, condition of women, Rigveda, Chanakya, Draupadi, Uruvi

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Seen with the eyes of love and understanding Indian Literature is akin to a garden with variety of flowers on its landscape. From Ancient times, from the times of Vedas, Literature has comedown to us in the form of Sruti and Smriti – the one which is heard and the one which is memorized. Thus, orality has been there since time immemorial. The entire Vedic, Puranic and Upanishadic Literature and more is mostly in oral form which was converted into written format quite late. In fact, the longest epic ever, The Mahabharata was narrated by a Sage Vaishampyan to King Janmajay and this is how it came to us. Prior to this, The Mahabharata was narrated by its author Veda Vyas to Lord Ganesh who became his scribe. There is a popular story associated with this arrangement of the conditions laid down by lord Ganesh and Veda Vyas. It is said that, it took around three years to complete this grand epic. Veda Vyas first taught this story to his son Sukhdev and later to his disciples Vaishampyan, then Jemini and Asit Deval. Sukhdev in turn taught this to Gandharv, Yakshas and Rakshasa. Naarad gave sermon on this epic to gods, Asit Deval to Pitras (forefathers) and Vaishampyan as mentioned earlier to the humans. The grandeur of this text can be seen in the beginning of the text itself where the shloka mentions that:

धर्मे चाख्ये च कामे च मोक्षे च भर्तृभ्य यद्विहासि
तद्विदुः न्यूनं यन्नेहासि न तत्क्वददत्

(O Bull among Bharatas (as said by Vaisampayana to Janamejaya), everything related to the four Purusharthas of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha, that is found in the epic can also be found elsewhere. But what is not here (in Mahabharata) is nowhere else.)

(Source: Adi Parva, Chapter 62, Verse 53)

The Mahabharata is essentially the story of the clash of clans but at the same point of time it also delineates a larger picture of women of those times. It draws its inspiration from the earliest texts like Rigved where “feminine energy is the essence of the Universe, the one who creates all matters and consciousness, the eternal and the infinite, the metaphysical and the empirical reality and finally the supreme self of everything.” On the other hand, Shiva is not complete without Shakti as she is the creator of everything that we surround ourselves with (thus the idea of Ardhnarishvar), to limiting her role as an obedient daughter, housewife and mother. Even in Contemporary times, India as a country has always been addressed as a mother for its citizens,

and also its soil is being respected as a woman called the Bharatmata, so in this context it is very much apparent to an outsider what stature a woman may have in this country.

However, there is another aspect to this view of womanhood. Chanakya while talking about women says “a woman by nature is courageous, deceitful, foolish, greedy and cruel. These are the innate attributes of a woman”. He goes on to add “a man must show great regard for his queen, his mother in-law, and the wives of his friend and his master. Those men who form, or approach women with the intention of forming illicit relationships with them, are the most morally depraved persons. In each religion women are treated with great respect. They are the adored one!” But the same Chanakya further opines that “a woman is believed to be more delicate than a man, but a woman is four times more brazen than a man, she also has six times his courage and eight times his strength of passion!” While expressing such views probably Chanakya has a character like Draupadi in his mind.

The conflict of Mahabharata is primarily a clash for power and control over Hastinapur and at the same time it is fought to avenge the humiliation of Draupadi during the game of dices where Yudhishtira the eldest of the five pandavas lost all of his wealth, his estate, himself and his brothers against the Kaurava’s and their uncle Shakuni. So it is very much relevant as to how the males even overshadowed a strong woman like Draupadi who was born from the yagya and therefore is called Yajnaseni. The implication of her question if he had lost himself in the game first then he was no longer free and did not have any ownership on her to stake in the game. It was believed that Draupadi was born to replace dharma, but no one knew that to fulfil her roles she would be insulted, demeaned and questioned at every turn in her life.

In The Mahabharata the safeguarding of a woman’s sanctity is not negotiable, and those who violate this principle are supposed to face dire consequences. Though whether or not there is any legitimacy if Duryodhan won Draupadi and this is followed the idea of his ownership of her, is supported by dharma or not is very much debatable till date. As Duryodhan befouled Draupadi of her feminine purity blatantly goes against dharma and therefore his fate is sealed at that particular moment.

Dharma does not have any exact translation in English language, and therefore can sometimes be

difficult to explain or define. Though generally it is described by the deities as the path of action for any human being, and with each being's dharma different from the other, also many parts of dharma are determined by which social class one belongs to. The best example of this would be of Duryodhan who in spite of committing so many atrocities on and off battlefield is believed to have gone to heaven, because he followed his Kshatriya dharma, and was known as 'a king who was never afraid even when the danger was great.'

The later texts like '*Queens of Hastinapur*' by Sharath Kommaraju and '*Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen*' by Kavita Kane show the women have a strong will and an identity apart from those assigned to them by the men in the society. They have tried to answer some of the major questions which might have come into the readers of the twenty – first century. Did Draupadi, Gandhari, Kunti, Uruvi really wanted to be tied up with the shackles of patriarchy? What would have been the result of the war if they were given a chance to be assertive and took a stand for themselves? What could be the consequences if a self – confident woman of the modern day world would have been dragged by any male member of her family? The authors have made an effort to answer these questions and to conclude a proper definition to the idea of an independent woman, who wants to build her own identity and has the power to assert herself when the story is retold through her eyes. They have shown how refolding the mythology from a woman's perspective can change the perspective of the people towards women in the present day society. They also show how the female perception is different from the male discourse, especially when the men in the present age look up to the myths and the characters of men in such stories.

The women in The Mahabharata bring out a unique dimension by being the centre of many important turning points in history of the Kuru clan. For example, in the Draupadi – Satyabama Samvada (episode) of the Vana Parva in The Mahabharata, a conversation between Satyabama (the wife of Krishna) and Draupadi when the Pandavas are in the forest for their exile. Satyabama enquires as to how Draupadi is able to keep the Pandavas devoted and loyal to her, and also hints that if Draupadi has been successful through vows, or incantations, or any kind of special medicaments. Draupadi in a very gracious and humble manner replies to Satyabama of her

daily activities which she performs with utmost care and devotion, like serving one's husband which is free from jealousy, wrath and greed, not indulging in the matters which are of not her family's concern and many more.

"Yudhishtira lost the dice game and went to Banabas. The Pandavas accompanied by Draupadi went to stay in the forest of Kamyaka. They were hospitably received by hosts of saints there. Many Brahmanas came to wait upon them...And the chief of the Yadavas, comforting Draupadi with a smile, saluting Yudhidhthira and Bhima, embracing Nakula and Sahadeva, and giving a solid punch on Arjuna's back, set out for Dwarka, with swift horses and Daruka as the pilot." (Cited from Indrajit Bandyopadhyay – <https://www.boloji.com/articles/1281/draupadi--satyabhama-samvada>)

This incident brings out the multidimensionality of activities that Draupadi performs. It also brings into the highlight that her role was not just limited to the stereotypical household activities, but also combined complex and difficult activities of the kingdom. This helps us in understanding her superiority in emotional and cognitive states.

The Hindu society has remained a patriarchal society from the time the Vedas where men are seen at the forefront and women had to be the subservient. They were expected to be obedient, tolerant, servile which became the basic reason for women to face discrimination which continues even till today. *The Queens of Hastinapur* by Sharath Kommaraju presents a feminine vision which remains active in toughest of the patriarchal world. About the book the author says "This is the story of Ganga, Madri, Pritha and Gandhari: women of The Mahabharata who, driven by their fears and ambitions, trigger events that lead to an epic war, propelling kings, princes and warriors towards glory and bloodshed, sin and redemption." The ideology of a woman being able to have a strong ground in a male dominated society, is seen through the character of Gandhari, Dhritrashtra's wife. Gandhari was a strong woman well versed with the ideas of politics and how to rule a kingdom such as Hastinapur. In the original Mahabharata she is shown as the dutiful wife who stood behind her husband at all costs so that he could rule the kingdom and her sons, that is the Kauravas, could become the future rulers of the kingdom. She is the epitome of the perfect idea of a homemaker as she decided to cover her eyes for the entire time she was married to Dhritrashtra. Though

Kommaraju shows her as a strong woman much capable of ruling a kingdom, it is shown in the novel that she was the one who decided that Pandu should go to the forest so that her husband can rule the kingdom in his brother's absence. She was the one to convince her husband and remind him of his true destiny to be the king. Gandhari being the proper queen does not take revenge on Bhishma even though he destroyed Gandhar (her kingdom) and killed everyone, leaving behind her brother Shakuni and herself. It is due to her efforts and powers that her son Duryodhan was able to gain some strength during the war, when she finally removes the cloth from her eyes so that her son can be saved. She is never recognized by any of her sons, as they always see her in a powerless position, but it is due to her advice only that Duryodhan was saved from Draupadi's curse during the game where she was disobeyed. She was seen as a possession won by Bhishma for Dhritrashtra, but it was only because of her advice in the end that the Pandavas saved both of them and did not abandon them from the kingdom of Hastinapur. So in this cast Gandhari though maybe the quiet wife, who does only what her husband says to her, but she is much more than that. She is the reason Dhritrashtra was able to become the king for so long, she was his identity and he would have made himself a good ruler if he would have recognized her ability to rule a kingdom with the best of her talents. Yes, she portrays herself as the perfect wife by blinding herself for the entire life, but Dhritrashtra never stops her from doing so as he sees this as an act of the ideal wife who should service her husband. Gandhari's act of self-assertion is seen in the novel when she demands Dhritrashtra to be the king, so she can be identified as the queen of the whole nation, and be seen as not just a possession won by Bhishma, because she thinks that her husband would be seated on the throne then she will be able to guide him properly and he will be seen as the appropriate king, and accepted by the people who thought that both of them were not fit to be rulers. Gandhari patted the old maid's hands. 'Look, Shubrasi,' she said, 'Hastinapur is but a young kingdom. Her king is no older than one and twenty. Pritha and I – why, in any other kingdom, we would be mere maidens. And Madri too ... the time has not come yet to speculate about who will be king and who queen.' 'But princess, Bhishma has already crowned Pandu king.' 'So he has. But he who can be crowned can also be dethroned.' Though, she became the queen she was not able to guide her husband as he turned a deaf ear towards her, when he sat on the throne and says that a woman does not have any

place in the politics of the state. If he would have listened to her during the game of dice, the war could have been prevented and countless lives could have been saved.

Throughout the ages, there have been several retellings of The Mahabharata. They are usually a focused study into the psyche of the individual characters from the great epic. As the epic cannot be reproduced entirely in the novel form, the authors had the choice to make selections and deletions from the original narrative. The presence of the pregnant silences of the women in the original story have been of great advantage to the writers of the modern era. Sharath Kommaraju says during an interview "with due modesty" that his Hastinapur series expands the epic rather than just retell it. *The Queens of Hastinapur* is a narrative which tries to understand and bring out the complicated and arduous lives that the selected women during the time of Mahabharata lived. The original epic is a male dominated and is from the perspective of a male, and the women are presented from a male centric point of view. However, this book mainly focuses on the narratives of important women who played a major role in changing the direction of history.

Another woman who has been disregarded all along but is worth mentioning about is Uruvi, the wife of Karna. Kavita Kane's book, *Karna's Wife – The Outcast's Queen*, tells the story of how a woman before marriage is known by her father's family name, and after marriage is known by her husband's family name. Her story begins with the archery contest where Karna, who is a charioteer's son, challenges Arjun in front of everyone, but is ridiculed and made fun because of his low birth. Enamoured by his beauty and charismatic personality Uruvi falls in love, and in spite of facing many difficulties marries him. The story runs parallel to the war of Mahabharata, and how both these events affect and shape her life from being a princess to being treated like an outcast form the gist of Kavita's novel. When Uruvi decides to marry Karna, her family is against the notion of their daughter going into the house of a low caste person. She is looked down upon by her mother and father because they think that if such an event happens their family name will be let down. Uruvi was even locked in her room by her mother for thinking of letting down her father's prestige, because even in that time a woman's happiness took a second seat, all her duty was to fulfil her duty as daughter and marry into a family the parents approved of usually of same stature and class. After marriage Uruvi

suddenly loses the recognition of a princess in the eyes of people and is looked down upon. She is treated not with respect but with scorn from the other princess. She is abandoned by her distant family and friends, who are against this mismatched marriage and treat Uruvi like an outcast, or the wife of a suta-putra. Her identity is shifted from being the daughter of a king born with a silver spoon, to a common woman who is looked down upon for following her heart and being content as to where she is in life.

The true test for Uruvi comes at two points in the novel where she actually has to fight against the fact that she married Karna so she should accept her faith or show her will and stand alone and prove her identity as a strong woman. The first incident is when she starts to feel lonely in her husband's house, because the family is not able to adapt to her ways, and treat her like a normal person, they always associate her with the title of a princess. She feels left out because even though she tries to change her ways, and lifestyle preferences, for Karna's family she was an "outcast" also the fact that Karna's first wife was of the same social class as him therefore both Vrushali (Karna's first wife) and Karna had a deeper and more strong understanding of each other and their needs.

The second most important incident where Uruvi had to again decide between staying beside her husband or standing up and speaking against the wrong done in the game of dice held in Hastinapur court. Uruvi is infuriated with Karna as to how he mistreated Draupadi during the game, and even more so when she learns that it was her husband who suggested that Draupadi must be disrobed in front of the whole assembly. This incident leaves a very deep impact on her opinion about Karna, and she knows that this would be Karna's downfall and he would eventually face the consequences with his life in the upcoming war. Uruvi at first is not able to accept the idea that her husband who always respects others and is a kind man, would call a woman a "whore" in front of the whole assembly. She literally has to fight against her instincts which are blinded by her love for Karna and stand up to him and make him realize that as to what he did with Draupadi was wrong even though she may have mistreated him in the past. Uruvi wants to believe that it should have been her husband to stop Duryodhan, but he was the one to pour oil in the fire and scorn a married lady about her status in the society, as to how come she is a pious woman if she has married five men.

It is wrong to associate a woman on the basis of what men describe them as, and therefore women are always under the shadows of the males, be it their father, brother, husband or any other man in their life. A woman is much more than a wife, a daughter or a sister. Yes, it is true that many roles can only be fulfilled by a woman but to define her identity just on the basis of these norms is purely wrong and judgemental. Many of us look back at the myths of our culture for the idealized version of what a woman is but we usually to forget that the story is only told from a man's perspective. Just like every coin has two sides, if the story is told from a woman's perspective, then we will get to know the length of strong will and passion allows woman to take an individual stand in a male dominated society, and to follow her desires and passion. Therefore, with time, we also need to change our perspective on how we identify a woman, and what she is capable of. These two novels go beyond a woman's physical appearance, her clothes and her place of birth. They try to show a woman for who she truly is. They try to show that forgiveness a true virtue present in abundance can only be found in a woman, no matter how questionable the actions of the other person are. It validates her emotions and shows that she is an equal. Recognizing a woman's worth will be the first step in the creation of a more powerful and equal society. One should try to find the missing balance which is lost in the cacophony of words, so that the society has more strong and self-assertive women.

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