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Women in Mahabharata: Fighting Patriarchy

Maneeta Kahlon, Ph.D.

Vyasa's Portrayal of Women

Vyasa casts his women—Kunti, Draupadi, Gandhari, Shakuntala, Devayani, Savitri, Damayanti— both in the heroic mould and as victims and practitioners of elements of patriarchy. The image of women in the original stratum of the epic is that which is etched out in the words of Shakuntala, as she upbraids Dushyanta for fickleness, contesting patriarchy and traditions of gender relations.

“A wife is a man's half,
A wife is a man's closest friend;
A wife is Dharma, Artha and Karna,
A wife is Moksha too .
A sweet-speaking wife is a companion in happy times;
A wife is like a father on religious occasions;
A wife is like a mother in illness and sorrow.
The wife is a means to man's salvation . . .
Happiness, joy, virtue, everything depends on her.” Citation

Study of Male Authority and Subordination

This paper is a study of the three central characters of Mahabharata and how they deal with male authority and subordination. The characters of Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi conform to the elements of *Stridharma* while also manifesting exigent actions.

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As soon as Pritha was born she was adopted by Kunthibhoja; and since then she came to be known as Kunti. Pritha was a happy child and yet yearned for a mother in Kunthibhoja's mansion. She found none to confide her fears, hopes and anxieties. She had the feeling of being left adrift, unguided and unwanted rankled deep within her for long years. This affected her future responses. Kunthibhoja placed the nubile girl Pritha at the disposal of the eccentric sage Durvasa and exhorted her not to neglect any service out of pride in her good-looks or in her status. He cautioned her against displeasing the quick-tempered sage, lest she bring dishonor to her clan and to herself. An ambiguous order however the sage was pleased and he gifted Pritha with a mantra that would summon, at her will, any god. The girl, a short time thereafter, out of sheer child-like curiosity tested whether the mantra would really work. It did work and she was blessed with a beautiful son but it was her clan's honor that came in the way of Kunti owning her firstborn.

Kunti then took that most accursed decision of her life – to set adrift her son, for the honour of her adopted father and his family. But she regretted abandoning her child; in silent grief and guilt she carried the torment all her life. Kunti was a princess and a queen to be. In contrast, Satyawathi a fisherwoman was not inhibited by qualms of clan honor etc; and she was not scared or ashamed of being known as an unwed –mother albeit recognizing her son only when the need arose.

Kunti was married to Pandu but soon after her marriage, Pandu, her husband married the beautiful Madri and she was devoid of love. But once again because of his disability and after coming to know of Kunti's boon he forced Kunti to beget sons and the mighty Pandavas were born

The years that followed Pandu's death was truly of great distress. Poverty, insecurity and shame haunted her and her sons, unaided by the Vrishnis or the Bhojas. A question that usually comes up is: why Kunti could not seek assistance from the Vrishnis or the Bhojas (both being Yadavas – Kunti's maternal clan). This question has not been answered clearly. Kunti alone protected and guided her sons. Her lone trustworthy contact in Hastinapura was Vidura. She realized that her friendless, shelter-less and impoverished sons badly needed supporters and allies if they had to survive, fight back their tormentors, and regain the lost kingdom and honor.

Kunti had the wisdom to educate her sons in proper use of power and the foresight to build alliances that would someday come in handy. At Ekachakranagara when Yudhishthira opposed sending Bhima to fight Bakasura the monstrous eater, Kunti retorted rather sternly "I am not foolish; don't think me ignorant; I am not being selfish. I know exactly what I am doing. This is an act of dharma. Yudhishthira, two benefits will follow from this act; one, we will repay a Brahmin and two, we will gain moral merit. It is a king's duty to protect. It is his dharma."

Much has been written about Kunti asking her sons to share whatever they brought home. What that decision of Kunti did to the Brothers and how that bonded the six together becomes explicit later in the Epic. Vyasa comments "each had her in his heart" (Adi Parva 193,12). The respect and implicit obedience her sons displayed was a tribute to Kunti and her motherhood. It was

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something that Gandhari could not achieve. Truly, Kunti is a remarkable picture of maternal heroism created by Vyasa.

Showing great foresight she gets her first born Karna to promise that he would not kill the Pandavas except Arjuna. Finally, Kunti in order to ensure safety of her sons humiliated herself and revealed the “misdeed” of her youth. Flare up, even if briefly, like tinduka-wood. Do not smolder away in billowing fireless smoke. (Udyoga Parva, 132 . 32-34-37).

After the war she decided to retreat into the forest along with the blind king Dritharastra, his blindfolded queen Gandhari and Vidura. She consoles her sons by saying that she inspired them to fight not because she desired for a kingdom or for a palace but because she desired an honorable life for her sons.

Kunti’s life is remarkable placed by her foster father at the mercy of an eccentric sage she fell a victim of a god’s lust, an impotent husband forced her beget children from others thrice over. She yearned for love but received none. In her days of utter misery neither her father nor her foster-father cared to help her. She guided and protected her sons virtually alone. She accompanied her husband, Pandu when he renounced the throne and left for the forest. Severe austere life devoid of the sophistication of palace did not deter her and she accepted the change in her fortune with poignant and dignified grace. On a later occasion, she joined her sons in their journey towards the forest, and even outlived an assassination attempt in the wax mansion by the Kauravas. Her word was taken seriously both for their wisdom and guidance as in the case of Draupadi marrying her five sons.

Kunti’s attitude towards Karna may be puzzling. Many scholars have stated that there are reasons for her indifference. May be, she was conscious of her honour while dealing with Karna as he was born out of marriage. But when Karna eventually died, in the war, she courageously and wholeheartedly acknowledged his valour. At the same time she also performed her duties as mother to Nakula and Sahadeva who are actually Madri’s children. In fact, this act resurrects her from the sin of rejecting of her own Karna. Her care and concern for them forms a foil to her treatment of her own son Karna.

When we analyse Kunti’s mindset, we realize that much of it stems from her childhood insecurity. A peep into her childhood provides a strong clue to her motives behind her insistence on not giving Karna his due. Her character as a person and as a mother is greatly influenced by the happenings of her younger days. Kunti comes across as a brave and a wise woman grievously hurt and disappointed in love. She was not a woman cast in the conventional mould and Kunti stands testimony to it with all her positive and negative sides complementing each other.

Gandhari

Gandhari, often referred to as the ‘model of female propriety’, also considered an incarnation of Mati, (Goddess of Intelligence), was forced to marry, Dhritrashtra, a blind king who was much older to her. This came as a rude shock to her. Gandhari volunteered to blindfold herself throughout her married life which is generally assumed to be an act of supreme self sacrifice.

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She therefore forced herself into an act of self denial of the power and pleasure of sight that her husband could never experience and relish.

Underlying Gandhari's resolve to remain blindfolded was a silent but a strong protest in opposition to the power games and of course the forced marriage, at once making her enforced blindness both physical and metaphorical. Gandhari had a long and frustrating pregnancy and at the end the sons are born through Vyasas intervention.

As a mother, twice she manifested her affection and concern for her son Duryodhana. Queen Gandhari is distraught when she hears that all her sons save Duryodhana have been slain. Despite knowing that Duryodhana was wicked and his cause unrighteous, she decides to help him win. Asking him to bathe and enter her tent naked, she prepares to use the great mystic power of her eyes, blind-folded for many years out of respect for her blind husband, to make his body invincible to all attack in every portion.

When Gandhari's eyes fall upon Duryodhana, they mystically make each part of his body invincible. She is shocked to see that Duryodhana had covered his loins, which were thus not protected by her mystic power.

And the second time she displayed her wrath for the loss of her children was through a small gap in the cloth with which her eyes were blindfolded; her gaze fell on Yudhisthira's toe. The toe was charred black reflecting the power of her vision and causes the annihilation of Yadavas.

Gandhari is a powerful character and yet a puzzling one. Gandhari vows to remain sightless. This resolve to remain blindfolded could also have been seen as a silent but a strong protest against this marriage but this act of Gandhari was construed as an act of supreme self-sacrifice and obedience to the patriarchal subordination. Gandhari was a faithful and most devoted wife conforming to the patriarchal mindset of the people. Yet her silence endorsed the power of women. Her sons failed to understand this silence. They deceived themselves into believing that their mother vouched for their actions. Her blindness now blinded the others.

Gandhari was much respected and admired quite deservedly so by all, including the Pandavas. She was endowed with a tough spirit and rationality, that even King Dhritarashtra solicited her sound advice. She never missed an opportunity to urge him to restrain the activities of Duryodhana. She has also insisted that he reinstate the Pandavas but, never really voiced it out to her sons herself. She stood for justice and refused to bless the Kauravas before the Kurukshetra war and believed that Dharma would triumph. She sat with the king listening to Sanjaya's narration of the war. An advocate of peace she was indeed very saddened by the tragic consequence of the war.

Draupadi

Draupadi had many names she was called Draupadi from her father; Krishnaa the dusky princess, Yajnaseni -born of sacrificial fire, Parshati, from her grandfather, Panchali, from her

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country; Sairindhri, 'the maid-servant' of the queen of Virata, Panchami, having five husbands and Nitayauvani, 'the ever-young'.

Vyasa describes her extraordinary beauty in elaborate and eloquent terms, "Eye-ravishing Panchali, black-and-smiling-eyed... Shining coppery carved nails, soft eye-lashes, swelling breasts, shapely thighs... Neither short nor tall, neither dark nor pale, with wavy dark-blue hair, eyes like autumn-lotus leaves, fragrant like the lotus...extraordinarily accomplished, soft-spoken and gentle... Her sweat-bathed face is lovely, like the lotus, like the jasmine; slim-waisted like the middle of the sacred Veda, long-haired, pink-lipped, and smooth-skinned. She is a dream incarnated of gods and men alike." (Adi Parva 169.44-46, Sabha 65.33-37). Her physical portrayal is that "the very sight of her was magnetic due to her irresistible beauty and fragrance" (Bhawalkar, 141).

But Draupadi was all this and much more. Draupadi was born with a purpose - the destruction of the Kurvas, She was married in a *swamyar*, the kings of countries far and near had come to win the hand of Panchali. The contest was simple - hit the eye of the revolving fish above by looking at its reflection. Arjuna impressively wins Draupadi's *svayamvara*, Draupadi was not consulted about the *swamyar* which was designed for her to be given as a trophy to the winner in a contest set up by her father. In the context of Kunti saying share it equally among yourselves, Draupadi seems to have no word to say and had to abide by the family decision to marry five husbands.

Nobody asked about her thoughts and feelings. She had to simply acquiesce to the decision made for her. It is somewhat inexplicable that while the Mahabharata inquired into every aspect of the human condition, into every kind of relationship yet Draupadi's feelings both as a wife and as a woman in relation to each of her five husbands never formed the subject of anybody's concern except perhaps for her second eldest husband, Bhima.

However, there is considerable material to understand Draupadi's feelings not just as inference but through her own forceful articulation. After her husband loses her in a game of dice she does not collapse under the shocking news but challenges the very concept of Dharma and the basis of their conduct towards her. After the dice game Draupadi strongly questions Pratikami who is there to fetch her to the assembly. 'How can you say such a thing? Which Prince will gamble, with his wife as stake (Sabha Parva 67.5)'. In deep shock she asserted that he go back to the assembly and ask the gambler-king, Yudhisthira: 'whom did you lose first, your own self or me? it is only after I know the answer to this that this weak and helpless woman will come to the assembly.'" Draupadi, in the assembly again, threw a question at Duryodhana: 'Have you won yourself? Or myself? How do you presume that one husband is authorized to stake the wife while she has four other husbands? Moreover, according to Sastras, the deeds of a king who is in a miserable state due to over-indulgence in hunting, drinking, gambling and hankering after women are not lawfully binding. Hence how could the Kauravas' own Panchali? I am a free woman by all means."

Draupadi was the only person who was standing up for justice. She lashed out against the entire court, stupefying all with her logic. She questioned the legality of the right of Yudhishtir to place her at stake when he had lost his own freedom and

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consequently did not possess any property in the first place. Moreover, Draupadi said that Yudhishtira had no right to put Draupadi at stake because as his wife, she was not his property. Draupadi challenged even the most elderly and respected people in the court. She called upon everyone present to protect her and when no one answered her pleas, she prayed to Krishna and he protected her. Fortunately, through her prayer to Krishna, a miracle occurs and she becomes the “visible recipient of divine grace in the form of endlessly descending sarees” (Hiltebeitel 280).

Witnessing the miracle of her undestroyable chastity, Bhishma, one of the Kauravas' elders, remarks that Draupadi must be a Goddess indeed. On being granted wishes from Dhritrashtra she rescued her hapless husbands from slavery. Even the embittered Karna could not help exclaiming in admiration that none of the world's renowned beautiful women had accomplished such a feat: like a boat she has rescued her husbands who were drowning in a sea of sorrows (Sabha 72.1-3).

This event is followed by Draupadi's vow for vengeance and the beginning of an insatiable desire for justice that is only quenched upon her enemy's blood running through her hair. Draupadi recounted the horrendous acts committed by the Kauravas and reminded them of their duty. Throughout the thirteen years of exile, Draupadi did not let her husbands forget how she was dishonored and how they were deceitfully deprived of their kingdom. Draupadi is determined, fearless, virtuous yet she is also arrogant, wile and cunning enough to get the needful done. In The Virata Parva is the chapter describing the final year of the forest exile, when the Pandavas and their common wife had to live disguised as servants in the palace of king Virata. In it, one discovers how Draupadi used the different personalities of her husbands to her advantage.

Kichaka publicly abused Draupadi but Yudhishtira, witness to his wife's humiliation, refused to help; she went to another husband who would avenge her humiliation. Not her favorite, Arjuna, who would never disobey the elder brother, but to the powerful Bhima. She realized that it was only Bhima who could rescue her and avenge her.

Vyasa describes in a playful loving narration how she warmed up to Bhima, aroused his love for her and set him up for a fight with Kichaka. She finds Bhima at night in his cook's quarters, twines herself round him as a creeper entwines a massive shala tree on the banks of the Gomati, as the bride of the sleeping king of beasts clasps him in a dense forest, as an elephant-cow embraces a huge tusker. And as Bhima awakes in Panchali's arms, she sings into his ears, in a vina like tone pitched at the gandhara note, the third in the octave. She narrates her misfortunes and her torments. She wails to Bhima “Any woman married to Yudhishtira would be afflicted with many griefs....What does Yudhishtira do? He plays dice...Look at Arjuna... A hero with earrings!” You are my true hero, she coos, I will consume poison and die in your arms, Bhima. She covers his face with her palms chapped and scarred in queen's service. Mighty Bhima melts like early morning dew at the first light. (Virata Parva, 20.30) and, that was the end of Kichaka.

She shared special relationship with Krishna and considered him a friend and equal. She prayed to him in every hour of need. Krishna always did the needful. Draupadi is the exemplification

of bhakti to God. She showed utmost faith to Lord Krishna. She is the embodiment of both bhakti and shakti.

Her success was so complete that even Satyabhama, intrigued, desired to share the secret of her success. In the Vana Parva of the Mahabharata, Satyabhama, wife of Krishna, asks Draupadi, “Most women can barely manage to get control of one husband; you have managed to secure the affections of all five. What is your secret? Is it magic? Is it a spell?” Her answer was that “She devotedly serves her husbands and their other wives without pride, anger or desire. With affection and self restraint she waits attentively on their wishes without any selfish thoughts. She works hard to manage the home, never speaks harshly, never laughs loudly, never causes offence and is never idle. She never cooks food her husbands do not like, and she is dutiful in performing the offerings to the ancestors and in serving guests. Even though they are gentle by nature she treats her husbands as if they were venomous snakes, always prone to anger.

The eternal *dharma* for a woman is to serve her husband in this way, for he is her god and she has no object in her life other than his service” (Sutton 423) Draupadi’s answer reveals her own internalized patriarchal norms when she counsels Satyabhama that a virtuous and dedicated wife brings happiness to the husband.

Draupadi is often referred to as Nathavathi_Anathavat(perhaps to express the agony of Draupadi having five husbands but with none to protect her. She was married to five yet she was all alone, unprotected, uncared and unloved. She always had about her certain loneliness. She once poured her heart to Krishna “No husband have I, nor son, nor brother. So much so, O Madhusudana, that even you are not mine” (Vana Parva 10.125)

As Shri Pradip Bhattacharya said “Yudhishtira pledges her like chattel at dice .Draupadi finds her five husbands discarding her repeatedly. Each of them takes other wives. Draupadi stands quite apart from her five husbands not one of them not even Sahadeva of whom she took care with maternal solicitude, nor her favourite Arjuna tarries by her side when she falls and lies dying on the Himalayan slopes. Yajnaseni leaves the world all by herself, nathavati anathavat.” Draupadi was the first to fall in the journey through himalyas Nathavati Anathavath was never truer of Draupadi than in the moments of her death.

Draupadi was a victim of her extraordinary beauty and intelligence that inflamed the desire in the hearts of men. She is seen both as symbol of suppressed female in male-dominated society otherwise she wouldn’t have been put in the dice game and sometimes seen as a provocateur of war. Her role symbolizes the concerns for the treatment of women in a society dominated by patriarchal ideals (Sutherland 63). Her voice is there but it is stifled and remains so despite her assertions.

The Women

All the three women discussed here had a will of their own, they had power and influence, but each in her own manner. “They protest against exploitation in their own powerful way” (Vijayasree. C) Kunti treated with much respect in the Epic, was a heroic mother who did not

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seek anything for herself, she was both an embodiment of Stree dharma and a departure from it. Gandhari was a faithful and most devoted wife and yet she through her sightless eyes wields power. Throughout this epic the true character of Draupadi emanates. She is a victim of patriarchy as well as an empowered woman.

Modern Hindu thought still attests to patriarchal virtues in which women are considered inferior and subject to their passionate nature (Sharma 41). Draupadi, however, displays her individuality, strength, and unyielding determination for both justice and vengeance. Through these characteristics the figure of Draupadi has come to be a symbol of empowerment for women. Not only is Draupadi an empowering character, but Draupadi stands out, with her positive qualities as a woman and wife to the Pandavas. Through her actions as wife Draupadi “had become the life breath of her husbands, dearer to them than their life” (Bhawalkar 142) and as such, following her great embarrassment at the hands of the Kauravas, she becomes a pivotal reason for the Pandavas to seek vengeance on the Kauravas for their *adharmic* behaviour. She did not seek anything for herself. Yajnaseni, the one born out of fire, offered herself as a sacrifice in the fire of life.

Though the legend of Draupadi begins within the Hindu epic, her influence extends far beyond the words of her story. “Tamil version of the epic, dating to c.1400 CE, includes additions which relate her apotheosis to the powerful Mother Goddess of Fire” (Diesel 9). She is seen as tool for women to take some control within their lives and fight the patriarchal oppressions of Indian society.

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