

The Important Role of Women in Mahabharata: A Philosophical Approach

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Abstract:

The Mahabharata is a profound philosophical work that examines the roles and significance of women in addition to being a story of bravery and conflict. The main female characters—Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, Subhadra, and Uttara—are examined in this article along with their impact on the moral and ethical climate of the epic. It talks about how these women defy social expectations and live out the values of dharma, karma, and renunciation. Their agency and wisdom are reflected in their positions as decision-makers, mentors, and change agents. This study illuminates the intellectual depth of the Mahabharata and the crucial role that women played in forming its story by examining their hardships and contributions.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Women, Dharma, Karma, Philosophy.

Introduction:

One of the two great Indian epics, the Mahabharata, delves deeply into human nature and morality in addition to telling a story of war, politics, and dharma. Even though the male soldiers and their valiant deeds are frequently the center of attention, women play an equally important role in this epic story. Women in the Mahabharata are not only passive characters; they are decision-makers, change agents, and carriers of philosophical and moral knowledge. This article examines the philosophical relevance of the roles that important female characters in the Mahabharata perform.

One of the best epics in Indian history, the Mahabharata, tells a complicated plot full of bravery, dharma, and moral quandaries. Even while the Mahabharata is frequently viewed as a story of valiant men and great conflicts, women play an equally important role in it. In the epic, women play a significant role in determining the course of events rather than just being bystanders. The importance of women in the Mahabharata is examined in this study, with a focus on their autonomy, resiliency, and intelligence.

Women as Catalysts of Change:

Women in the Mahabharata are often the driving force behind major events. They are not just confined to their traditional roles but influence the course of history through their intelligence, resilience, and righteousness.

1. Shakuntala: *The Matriarchs of the Epic*

Shakuntala, mother of Bharata, establishes the lineage that ultimately leads to the Kuru dynasty, showing how women shape the very foundation of the story.

Shakuntala plays a crucial role in the Mahabharata as the mother of Bharata, the legendary king after whom India (Bharat) is named. Though she is not directly involved in the main war of the epic, her story,

found in the Adi Parva (the first book of the Mahabharata), is essential to the genealogy of the Kuru dynasty.

Shakuntala was the daughter of the celestial nymph Menaka and the sage Vishwamitra. In the forest, she was brought up by the sage Kanva. After meeting her and falling in love, King Dushyanta secretly married her in a Gandharva marriage—a union based on permission from both parties. Shakuntala gives birth to Bharata after Dushyanta departs, and the child grows up in the forest. Bharata rises to prominence as a monarch, renowned for his courage and fairness. The Mahabharata's events are caused by the Kuru dynasty, which is eventually formed by his descendants.

Due to a curse by Sage Durvasa, Dushyanta forgets Shakuntala. When she arrives at his court with their son, the king initially refuses to recognize her. However, divine intervention restores his memory, and Shakuntala is accepted as queen.

She is a legacy in the Mahabharata. Shakuntala's son, Bharata, sets the foundation for the Kuru dynasty, making her a crucial ancestral figure in the epic. Without her, the lineage that led to the Pandavas and Kauravas would not exist.

Despite not being a warrior or a queen who directly affects the Kurukshetra battle, Shakuntala is one of the most important characters in the Mahabharata since she is the mother of Bharata. Themes of love, fate, tenacity, and justice are prominent in her story and recur throughout the epic.

2. Satyawati: Role in the Mahabharata is foundational

Satyavati, the grandmother of the Kauravas and Pandavas, plays a pivotal role in the Mahabharata's lineage. Her determination to secure the throne for her descendants leads to the birth of Vyasa, the sage who compiles the epic. Satyawati, often called the "Grandmother of the Kuru Dynasty," plays a crucial role in shaping the events of the Mahabharata. She is the wife of King Shantanu, the mother of Vyasa, and the grandmother of Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Vidura. Her decisions influence the future of the Kuru dynasty, ultimately leading to the great war of Kurukshetra. Her marriage to King Shantanu. Satyawati was a fisherwoman who caught the eye of King Shantanu due to her divine beauty and fragrance. Her father, however, placed a condition that her son must inherit the throne. To fulfill this demand, Shantanu's son, Bhishma, took a vow of lifelong celibacy, ensuring that Satyawati's children would rule the kingdom.

She is mother of Vyasa (The Author of Mahabharata). Before her marriage to Shantanu, Satyawati had a son, Vyasa, from the sage Parashara. Vyasa later became the author of the Mahabharata and played a vital role in continuing the Kuru dynasty through the practice of Niyoga (Levirate marriage).

Satyavati has a major role in the Mahabharata. Without her, the Kuru bloodline would have ended and the epic itself would not have occurred. Her desires, decisions, and the consequences of her decisions—which lead to the great battle of Kurukshetra—shape the destiny of the Kuru dynasty. She is a strong woman who made sure a dynasty that changed the path of history continued to exist.

3. Subhadra: Encompasses being a pivotal familial link among central characters

Through her son Abhimanyu, whose valor in combat is famous, Subhadra, Krishna's sister and Arjuna's wife, plays a significant part in the epic. Significant contributions are also made by other women, including as Hidimba, Ulupi, and Madhavi, showing that women in the Mahabharata are not limited to conventional positions but play a crucial role in advancing the plot.

4. Draupadi: The Embodiment of Honor and Justice

Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas, is one of the most powerful female characters in the epic. Her humiliation in the Kaurava court becomes the turning point of the story, leading to the Kurukshetra war. She is not just a victim but a voice of justice, questioning the moral fabric of society. Her refusal to accept

injustice symbolizes the fight against adharma (unrighteousness). Draupadi's life exemplifies the philosophical idea of karma and dharma—actions leading to consequences and the importance of upholding righteousness at all costs.

In addition to upsetting the conventional standards of marriage and commitment, her polyandrous marriage to the five Pandavas sparks important intellectual discussions on dharma and obligation. This unusual marriage demonstrates the agency Draupadi exercises in making decisions in her life and illustrates the adaptability of dharma in exceptional situations. Her contribution to the Pandavas' battle strategy also demonstrates her intelligence and leadership abilities, demonstrating that women were not passive observers but rather active contributors to the course of history.

Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas, is one of the most powerful female figures in the Mahabharata. She plays a crucial role in the narrative, from her swayamvara to her humiliation in the Kaurava court, which ultimately becomes a turning point in the epic. Her vow for justice fuels the Pandavas' resolve to reclaim their honor. Draupadi is not only a symbol of suffering but also of resistance and determination.

5. Kunti: *The Wisdom of Destiny and Duty*

Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, plays a crucial role in shaping the destiny of her sons. Her ability to endure suffering with dignity and her deep understanding of dharma make her a philosophical figure in the epic. She teaches her sons about the importance of duty (kartavya) and sacrifice, emphasizing that personal hardships must not deter one from the path of righteousness. Her interactions with Karna also highlight the theme of fate versus free will.

Kunti's decision to abandon Karna at birth, a choice made under societal constraints, brings into focus the moral complexities of motherhood. Her eventual recognition of Karna as her son and her plea for him to join the Pandavas showcase the eternal struggle between personal duty and greater ethical considerations. Furthermore, her ability to maintain the unity of the Pandavas, despite their internal struggles and individual ambitions, underlines her strategic wisdom and emotional intelligence.

Kunti, the Wise Matriarch, is a very wise and prescient person. Her choices influence her sons' futures. She has a major impact on the moral complexity of the conflict by disclosing Karna's identity. Kunti's strength and resilience are demonstrated by her capacity to withstand adversity and provide her sons with wise guidance.

6. Gandhari: *The Strength of Moral Conviction*

The mother of the Kauravas and the queen of Hastinapur, Gandhari, is a representation of selflessness and steadfast moral conviction. She exemplifies the concept of loyalty and renunciation by blindfolding herself in solidarity with her blind spouse. Her intellectual conflict between morality and maternal love, however, is intense. Her ultimate curse on Krishna serves as a reminder that every action has repercussions and represents the unavoidable rule of karma.

Gandhari's forbearance and her deep grief over the loss of her sons make her a tragic yet powerful figure, emphasizing the conflict between personal emotions and moral duty. Her presence in the epic serves as a warning about the consequences of excessive attachment and the failure to guide one's progeny along the righteous path. Her ability to foresee the destruction of the Kuru dynasty, yet being powerless to prevent it, adds a layer of tragic wisdom to her character.

The blindfolded queen Gandhari is a character of immense sacrifice and moral dilemma. By blindfolding herself as a gesture of solidarity with her blind husband, Dhritarashtra, she symbolically embraces suffering. Though she warns her sons against adharma, her unwavering loyalty to them contributes to the tragic consequences of the war.

7. Subhadra: *The Voice of Compassion and Love*

Subhadra, the sister of Krishna and the wife of Arjuna, plays a subtle yet important role in the epic. As the mother of Abhimanyu, she represents maternal love and courage. Her influence in raising Abhimanyu and imparting knowledge showcases the significance of nurturing virtues in future generations.

Unlike many other women in the Mahabharata, Subhadra's agency is more understated, yet she symbolizes the softer, nurturing aspects of dharma. Her elopement with Arjuna also reflects the agency women had in choosing their partners, emphasizing love and personal choice within the framework of dharma. Additionally, she serves as a bridge between Krishna's divine wisdom and the human struggles of the Pandavas, reinforcing the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership.

8. Uttara: *The Symbol of Hope and Continuity*

Uttara, the wife of Abhimanyu, represents resilience and hope. Even after the tragic loss of her husband in battle, she continues to be an important figure in the lineage of the Pandavas. Her son, Parikshit, ensures the continuation of the Kuru dynasty, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life and destiny in Hindu philosophy.

Uttara's journey from a young princess to a grieving widow and then a mother raising the future king highlights the theme of perseverance and the role of women in maintaining dynastic continuity. Her character embodies the idea that life continues despite immense loss, symbolizing regeneration and resilience in the face of adversity.

Conclusion:

In the Mahabharata, women play a significant role in the philosophical profundity of the epic and are not merely supporting characters. The story is shaped by their deeds, hardships, and wisdom, which also provide eternal moral, ethical, and duty values. We can better understand the intricacies of dharma, the certainty of karma, and the resilience of human character by looking at their responsibilities from a philosophical standpoint. By doing this, the Mahabharata maintains its status as a profound examination of human existence rather than merely a historical or religious work, with its women serving as a key component in establishing its moral and intellectual core.

The women in the Mahabharata are far from passive figures; they are catalysts of change, symbols of sacrifice, and bearers of wisdom. Their struggles, decisions, and actions impact the fate of kingdoms, making them indispensable to the epic's narrative. This critical study highlights the Mahabharata's nuanced portrayal of women, reflecting their strength, intellect, and enduring influence in shaping history.

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