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Female Characters in Mahabharata



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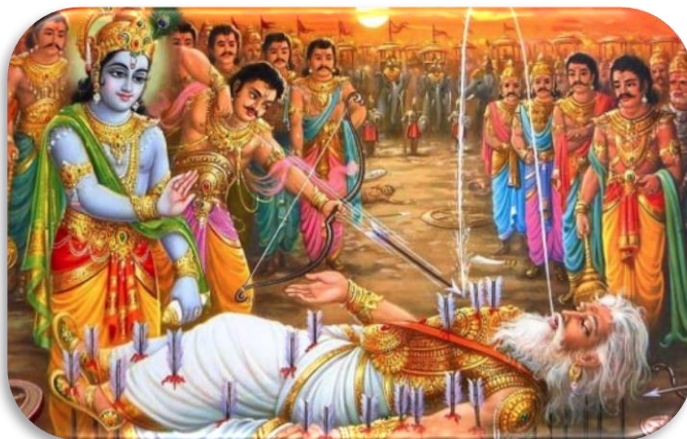
Female Characters in Mahabharata

Shikandi

Shikhandi had been born in a previous life as a woman named Amba. Amba was the eldest daughter of the King of Kashi. Along with her sisters Ambika and Ambalika, she was taken from their Swayamvara by force by Bhishma, as punishment to the Kingdom of Kashi for not inviting Hastinapur nobility to the event. After defeating several kings, including Salwa, the King of Saubala, Bhishma absconded with the princesses and presented them for marriage to Vichitravirya, the crown prince of Hastinapur. It was the ninth night of the Kurukshetra war, the midpoint of the legendary war. The war was not really going anywhere, sometimes Bhishma, leading the Kauravas had the upper hand; sometimes the Pandavas led by the young Dhristadhyumna was looking powerful. It seemed that an end was nowhere to be seen. Even though Bhishma adored Pandavas, he fought the war for the Kauravas. Hence, it was important for him to die to establish Dharma, said Krishna. However, he had been given a boon by his father that he could choose the time of his own death. Krishna suggested that if he can't die, he must be rendered helpless. It is said that Bhishma was invincible as long as he had a weapon in his hands. Krishna suggested that we should attempt to get him to lower his weapon. Bhishma would never lower his weapons in front of man, said the Pandavas.



Krishna then thought of a masterplan, that of getting a woman on the battlefield. Dhristadhyumna, Draupadi's twin brother suggested the name of his brother/sister Shikandini to fight the war. The latter was born a woman, but changed her sex and just like a man, was trained in warfare. She had also received a boon from Lord Shiva in her previous birth that only she will be able to defeat Bhishma (as she was Amba then whom Bhishma had wronged).



The tenth day dawned. The chariot rolled out. Behind Krishna stood the strange creature, neither man nor woman, or perhaps both, or neither, and behind him, Arjuna. Bhishma was furious to see a woman in a battlefield and refused to fight the war. Krishna calmly explains to Bhishma that the latter sees her as a woman, since he sees Amba in her who was a woman. However, her father raised her as a man and she exchanged her sex with Yaksha in the forest, so she is as much as a man as anyone fighting the war.

Hidimbi

The story begins in the Laksagrhya of the Mahabharata after the Pandavas reached a dense forest. Exhausted from their travels, they all fell asleep at night, except for Bhima who kept watch. In the same forest lived Hidimbi and her brother Hidimba, a very powerful rakshasa. He smelled the Pandavas at a distance and as usual asked the goddess Hidimbi to lure the well-built Bhima into a trap so he could eat him. Hidimbi confronted Bhima and instead fell in love with him. She assumed the form of a very beautiful lady and approached Bhima, expressing her desire to marry him by revealing her true identity, as well as her brother's intentions. Bhima confronted Hidimba but was soon overpowered. It was only with the supernatural powers of Hidimbi, supporting Bhima from a distance, that he could overcome and slay Hidimba. Kunti and other Pandavas all watched the duel from a distance.



Pandavas were sleeping and Bhima was awake looking for any troubles. Hidimba comes along and forgets immediately about the work assigned to her. She falls in love with Bhima and she assumed the form of a very beautiful lady, approached Bhima and expressed her desire to marry him. She also revealed her true identity and her brother's intentions. When Hidimba did not return for a long time, Hidimb went looking for her and saw her talking to Bhima. "I sent you to kill the human and you are talking to him. I will kill him myself." Saying so, he attacked Bhima. A fierce fight followed and ended with Bhima killing Hidimb. After the death of her brother, Hidimba wanted to marry Bhima. Bhima refused and wanted to kill Hidimba as well, but Kunti interfered. Kunti's acceded to Hidimba's proposal, but on one condition. Once She had a child from Bhima, She must allow Bhima to leave her and join Pandavas. Hidimbi happily agrees and they marry immediately. True to his word, Bhima spends every day with Hidimbi. She takes him wherever he desires and they have a wonderful, magical time together. Promptly at dusk, Bhima returns to the rest of the Pandava clan to spend the hours of the night.

Gandhari

Gandharī is a character in the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata. In the epic, she was the daughter of Subala, the king of Gandhara, a region spanning northwestern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, from which her name is derived. Gandhari's marriage was arranged to Dhritarashtra, the eldest prince of the Kuru kingdom. Gandhari voluntarily blindfolded herself throughout her married life. Her husband Dhritarashtra was born blind, and on meeting him and realizing this, she decided to deny herself the pleasure of sight that her husband could never relish. Gandhari bore a hundred sons, (collectively known as the Kauravas), and one daughter Dushala who married Jayadratha. The Kaurava, principally Duryodhana and Dushasana, were the villains of the Mahābhārata, and were all killed in their war against their cousins, the Pandava, at Kurukshetra. Although Gandhari's sons were portrayed as villains, the Mahābhārata attributes high moral standards to Gandhari. She repeatedly exhorted her sons to follow dharma and make peace with the Pandavas. Gandhari was especially close to Kunti who respected her like an elder sister. Gandhari made a single exception to her blindfolded state, when she removed her blindfold to see Duryodhana rendering his entire body except his loins invulnerable to any foe.

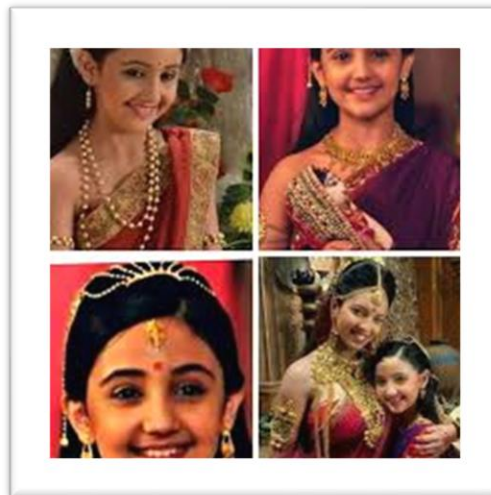


This was however to prove fruitless as Bhima smashed Duryodhana's thighs in their decisive encounter on the eighteenth day of the Kurukshetra battle, a move both literally and figuratively below the belt. Gandhari was also devout; in particular an ardent worshipper of Lord Shiva. Gandhari's sacrifice of her eyesight and her austere life was to grant her great spiritual power. Gandhari's anguish in the loss of her hundred sons resulted in her cursing Krishna in effect ensuring the destruction of the Yadavas. It is also said that through a small gap in the napkin in which her eyes were blindfolded, her gaze fell on Yudhisthira's toe. The toe was charred black due to her wrath and power. Gandhari ended her life with her husband and her sister-in-law Kunti in the Himalayas, where they died in a forest fire.

Dushala

Dushala, was the only daughter of king Dhritarashtra and Queen Gandhari and sister to Kauravas in the Hindu epic Mahabharata. She was married to Jayadratha the king of Sindhu. She had a son named Suratha. When Jayadratha

tried to kidnap and molest Draupadi and failed, the Pandavas decided to slay him. Because of the earnest request of Duhsala they left him alone, just shaving his head. Later Jayadratha played a vital role in getting Abhimanyu, son of Arjuna, killed in the War of Kurukshetra to satiate his vengeance. But Arjuna, with the help of Krishna, decapitated him.



Later, during the Ashwamedha Sacrifice, the horse of the Pandavas came to Sindhu, which was then ruled by Suratha, the son of Duhsala. Suratha with other archers confronted Arjuna, who slew Suratha and his army. Duhsala came to the battlefield wailing with the infant son of Suratha, which shattered Arjuna with sorrow. Arjuna proclaimed the infant the king of Sindhu.

Ganga

King Shantanu was walking by the Ganges river when he saw this incredibly beautiful woman. She was goddess Ganga in human form, but Shantanu did not know that. The king was so enamored by her beauty that he at once asked Ganga to marry him. He put his heart, love, his entire kingdom and wealth at her feet and made this request. Ganga – pleased with the King's love replied to him. "O

King. I shall accept to marry you on one condition. You must never ask me where I am from or the true nature of my origin. You must also never question me on any of my actions - good or bad. You must stand by me on all counts. If you act against any of these conditions, I shall leave you then and there. Shantanu and Ganga lived a life of serene happiness and love. It was a perfect marriage. Ganga was pure in her thoughts and this attracted Shantanu to her even more. Time passed and they were blessed with a new born son. When the child was born, Ganga took the child to the Ganges and cast it into river – immediately drowning and killing the newborn. She then walked back to her kingdom with a smile on her face. Shantanu was aghast with horror. He could not believe what he had just seen but he stopped himself from asking Ganga any question mindful of the promise he made to her. He wanted to. He didn't ask. As the years passed, Ganga gave birth to 6 more children and to each one, she did the same. Dropped the child in the river as soon as it was born and killed it. Shantanu, grieved as he was, asked no question and bore the pain with restraint. When the 8th child was born and Ganga walked to the river with the same intention. Shantanu could hold himself no longer. He cried out "Stop! You heartless woman. Why do you do this wretched act? Why do you what no mother would? You are as insane as you are beautiful". As Shantanu restrained Ganga from doing this horrible act, Ganga replied, "Dear King, you have broken the promise you made to me and the time has come for me to leave you. However, before leaving, I shall answer your question and reveal my origin and the reasons for my actions." "I am goddess Ganga and am in this human form as a result of Sage Vasishta's curse on the 8 Vasus." "These 8 Vasus were, one day, traveling on a holiday with their

wives when they came across Sage Vasishtha's ashram. Outside the ashram, they saw "Nandini", Vasishtha's divine cow. One of the wives was taken in so much by the beauty of the cow, that she requested her husband, Prabhasa, to bring the cow to her. Prabhasa replied "Dear, we are devas. What use do we have for cows or cow's milk? Even though it is Nandini, whose milk gives everlasting life, we are already enjoying immortality on account of being Devas. Most importantly, Sage Vasishtha is very fond of Nandini and it would be improper on our part to violate his integrity". Despite many attempts by Prabhasa, his wife did not yield. She made imploring requests and melted Prabhasa's heart. He agreed and thus, the 8 Vasus took Nandini and her calf by force and disappeared before Vasishtha returned to the Ashram. When Vasishtha returned and found Nandini missing, he, through his divine vision, saw all that had happened and cursed the 8 Vasus to be born as Mortal Men in this world. When the 8 Vasus came to know of this curse, they ran to Vasishtha and fell at his feet asking for his forgiveness. Vasishtha said that the curse cannot be lifted and has to follow its course. But the effect of the curse can be reduced.



He said - Go request goddess Ganga to be your mother on earth and ask her to relieve you of your birth as soon as you are born so that you may return to the heavens without long years of suffering. This reduction in effect I grant to 7 of you who supported Prabhasa in his act of stealing. Since Prabhasa was the one who actually stole the cow, the curse will remain in full effect for him and he will have to live his full lifetime on earth like a man. But he will live a great life and be regarded as one of the best souls to have ever walked the earth. Saying this, Vasishtha went back into meditation. Relieved to hear this, the Vasus approached Ganga and requested her to be their mother on earth and throw them into the river as soon as they are born. Ganga agreed and came to earth and became Shantanu's wife to carry out this task.



After telling this story, Ganga left Shantanu but took the infant with her. She brought him up for a few years and once the infant became a child, Ganga brought him back to Shantanu and said "Oh King. This is the 8th son I bore you. His name is Devavratha. He has learned the vedas from Vasishtha and is well skilled in all forms of sciences and archery." Shantanu was overjoyed at getting

his son back – who was glowing like a person of divine origin. He raised his son from thereon – full of love. This son, Devavratha goes on to become the famous Bhishma in the next chapter.

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