

Chapter – V

Conclusion

The Mahabharata is a mythology of the epic propositions that would shape the human life (especially the life of women) for centuries to come. It is a religious treatise for the Hindu religion and is one of the most respected creations of the entire literature of ancient India. It includes amusing facts regarding mythology, religion, legends, philosophy, social customs, and practices. This epic is also considered as *Kavya, Itihasa, Smriti, Dharmashastra, and Arthashastra*. It is an important source of ancient history that not only records the story of battle but also opens the different layers of its meaning to understand this epic on the cultural and contemporary basis. It has also influenced every aspect of human life, literature, art, social institutions, and behaviour by providing moral and social codes. Every aspect of the social, economic, cultural, and religious life of a person has been discussed at length in *The Mahabharata*. In the opening chapter of *The Mahabharata*, ‘Adi-Parva’, its contents have been described: “Stated in its brief outline, the inquiry is at the four ends of human life. Related at all times intimately with each other, they are: *dharma*, or the foundation of all relationships, personal and social; *artha*, or the material conditions of life; *kama*, sexual happiness, or, used in a wider sense, fulfilment of desire; and *moksha*, freedom, liberation. No one of them would have meaning without the other three” (Badrinath 4).

Religious mythology has perpetuated an idea of femininity and prescribed particular roles to play. Our beliefs and religious stories are associated with these mythological treatises. “Her (woman’s) husband was to be her guru (preceptor), his services were to be the substitute for guruseva (service to the preceptor), and household management was to serve the purpose of sacrificial duties” (Altekar 339). These conventional practices show women in traditional sources as silent or marginalised; but the role of women in the epic and how well they performed their role and status cannot be underestimated. Indian women for long have been surrounded with pain and suffering of the conventional social order. There is a need to go beyond the established boundaries to study their position in the epic. Our prime concern is with their representative position in *The Mahabharata* to investigate their

status by using the existing context. These women not only represent the superficial aspect of a woman but also her inner life. Dialogues and situations bring to the surface the deeply rooted psyche of these women. Status of women keeps changing through different times. In ancient India, women were treated respectfully. The marriage was considered a sacred institution and a sacred ceremony. *Swayamvaras* were organised to choose a husband by a woman; it shows the freedom of choice. Child marriage was not practiced, women were free to study and gain knowledge; thus they enjoyed an honourable position in the society.

If Indian women's position is considered as subordinate, then it is based on our Hindu tradition and culture that is supported by our religious scriptures. Characters that are considered role models for Hindu women are Sita, Savitri, and Damayanti among other mythological women who sacrificed everything for their husbands and families. For centuries, these images have had historical roots in our Hindu culture and these religious scriptures are used by our fundamentalists as a tool to justify the suppression of women.

The present study opened significant panoramas related to the women of this epic. The objective of this research was to represent the women of *The Mahabharata*. This was a kind of re-visiting the women characters of the epic. A close look of the epic explored that basically, the society was based on patriarchal system and dominated by men but it did not consider its women as totally subservient or non-entity. These women were not thoroughly silenced. The main objective of this research was to study those incidents and characteristics of their personalities which represented their strength, boldness, courage, and valiance. They did not tolerate the injustice done to them. They strongly opposed and sometimes their aggressiveness here or there in the epic may be threatening for male dominance. The patriarchal system did not force them into an entirely restricted life. It permitted some defined ways to feel and express their freedom. Just as marriage has been considered an important part of a woman's life in *The Mahabharata*. Sage Dirghatamas laid it down that women should not remain unmarried. Subhru, the daughter of rishi Kuni, did not marry and practiced severe penances, but at the time of her death heaven was denied to her because she was unmarried. She had to get married for a day to get heaven.

Woman is considered as a daughter, wife, and mother but injustice is done to her at every stage. In a patriarchal society, men set the rules and women follow them. Unintentionally and unconsciously women become culprits of the decisions and situations made by men.

The present research was divided into five chapters. In the first chapter of Introduction, general designs of the text along with its facts were discussed. Since the research was on the representation of women in the epic, so the changing status of women through different ages was also discussed. Apart from this, there were four other chapters. The second chapter "*Women Representing Power and Individuality*" presented a gallery of powerful women. Women of the epic, their thoughts, and actions made them the driving force behind men. They constantly intervened, manipulated, subjugated and subverted to make a place for themselves, and to exercise power. Men think they control women and are superior to them but these intelligent, brave, and beautiful women could not be easily compressed or crushed. Women in the epic were treated with respect socially. However, their birth was less welcome than a son's birth. Meanwhile, no female character of the epic was as complex and strong as Draupadi. The variety of her emotions varied from scenes of intimate shallowness to the bashful moments. Her seductive modesty of speeches advocated extraordinary and unmitigated bloodshed. "Her name, as it is a patronym, is unusually male" (McGrath 191). She was so beautiful that no woman could match her unsurpassable beauty. Because of her beauty, she won the hearts of her husbands. It was her beauty that produced troubles for her at every step in life. In her *swayamvara* hall, kings were ready to take up arms against each other to stake claim on her. Polyandry was not in trend but in the case of Draupadi, it was acceptable. However, a lot of discussions took place before marrying her to all the five Pandavas because it was not acceptable to king Drupada, father of Draupadi. Her beauty could have generated the animosity among Pandu brothers, that is why Yudhishtira decided to marry her with all the five Pandava brothers. So she became a factor of unity among brothers. Neither did Draupadi choose this polyandrous custom nor was she in the favour of it. She had only chosen Arjuna in her *swayamvara* but then followed the orders of her husband and in-laws. She faced disgrace throughout her life due to this

polyandry; she was called a prostitute in kuru sabha. Karna openly called her prostitute and considered her an object of enjoyment because she already had five husbands. Yet, the respect that Draupadi commanded can never be lessened. She was strong-willed, progressive, and hard determined. She was born out of the sacred fire that is something unnatural but led a life of a normal human being, which was full of pleasures and sufferings. She was admired by her husbands for her intelligence, wit, and excellent understanding of the kingship. Draupadi was determined to take revenge for her degradation. Her ability of speech was unmatched and she was successful in managing her audiences with her competent and calculating speeches. Her private conversation with Bhima revealed her competency in manipulation of the situations. Draupadi was a valiant princess of the epic of *The Mahabharata*. She was firm with an unbending will. Draupadi has remained a mysterious woman of substance. She reduced her enemies to ashes. Draupadi had developed strength to bear the trials of life. She did not bend before the wicked. Her personality and charm was magical. She was in no way less than any valiant hero of the epic in spirit, heroism, and virtue. Her story is an account of suffering, and humiliation but she defeated each one of the culprits of her humiliation and agony. Draupadi is the most intricate and debated female character in Hindu literature. On one hand, she could be feminine, sympathetic, and substantial and on the other, she could cause chaos on those who did wrong to her. She never compromised her self-respect and her rights by igniting the spark of revenge in the hearts of the Pandavas. If *The Mahabharata* is an intricately woven saga of hatred and love, bloodshed and noble thoughts, courage and cowardice, beauty and gentleness, victory and defeat, then Draupadi is its shining jewel, casting the shadow of her towering personality over the epic and the all-destroying war it describes. Draupadi not only earned her position in the epic but she is also a role-model for traditional Hindu woman. She may be considered as the first feminist of India because of her courage in confronting the disturbing states and people in her life. Though Draupadi is not worshipped as an ideal woman like Sita. Even in the society people prefer to name their daughters as Sita and not Draupadi whereas in the contemporary times demand of the circumstances is to be like Draupadi and not Sita. Draupadi is counted among the five maidens (*panchkanya*) of

India whose remembrance relieves one from all sins. In spite of the sufferings she went through, she proudly stands as a dignified, determined, strong, and powerful woman. She is one among the few women in Hindu mythology who were aggressive and spoke their mind in the men's world.

Kunti was also one of the most inspirational characters of *The Mahabharata*. She was intelligent, loving, and soft but also bold at the same time. She did not become the queen of Hastinapur but she knew very well how and where to use her power. Far-sightedness was her important quality. She knew very well that war between Pandavas and Kauravas was inevitable, so she always encouraged her sons to fight with valour. She also wanted justice for her daughter-in-law, Draupadi. She considered Draupadi's insult as her own. She remained strong and powerful in the journey of her life. After losing Pandu, Kunti had to take all the burden of responsibilities of his sons and their upbringing. She made her sons strong and correct. Kunti without the help of her husband grew up her children in such a way that they always followed the path of *Dharma* and won the battle of Kurukshetra. Kunti was a widow but was never treated with any type of social stigma. However, unlike her grandmother-in-law Satyawati who had no problem with summoning her illegitimate son Vyasa for the welfare of the Hastinapur dynasty, Kunti did not acknowledge the existence of her premarital son.

Like Kunti, Gandhari too never left the path of *Dharma* even though she was accompanied by a weak and ambitious husband, conspiratorial brother Shakuni, hate filled misguided sons. Nobody listened to her and she was torn by her sense of justice, her duty to her husband and her maternal affection towards to her sons. Her loneliness and her grief did not make her weak rather she stood strongly amidst all kinds of strife. Gandhari decided to cover her eyes throughout her life only for the sake of her husband. To complete her duty, she sacrificed all enjoyments, and pleasure of her life. She could not even see her children while they were alive. Kunti and Gandhari both played their role as a mother in their field according to their strength and weaknesses. But Gandhari's role could not fix her as the dominating wife or mother. She always tried to show the path of *Dharma* to her husband and sons but they never followed her

instruction. Kunti and Gandhari being mothers tried to teach their children the right path of *Dharma* in life. Gandhari could not achieve success in her objective.

Satyavati was represented as an ambitious and practical woman. She was aware of her rights and freedom of choice. She went through every phase of life boldly and without any regret. She was confident, clear-headed and firm for her goals like modern day woman. Marriage always remained an important factor in the lives of the women of *The Mahabharata*. It not only changed the social status of a woman but also offered new and different roles. Just as Satyawati got married to King Shantanu and made her status countable in the royal lineage. She became the mother queen of Hastinapur and somewhere sidelined the association of Bhishma with the Hastinapur throne. She gained the powers of a queen and enjoyed the status of a woman with high prestige.

Savitri conveys the message of hope to the contemporary society. The state of depression and sorrows for a woman are nothing more than death but the character of Savitri illuminates optimism in womenfolk. The story of Savitri is not only a legend of divine love but also an enormous classic of hope. Damayanti and Shakuntala also represent strong women who did not bend to tough situations. Their indomitable courage and resoluteness made them true heroines in their life.

In the third chapter "*Women at periphery*", an attempt was made to represent the lesser-known women of the epic. It gave a critical account of their position. Apart from the leading women characters like Draupadi, Gandhari, Kunti, etc., there are other women characters of the epic who have been kept under the shade of neglected identity. Approximately one hundred seven women characters are mentioned in the epic. Characters of Ganga, Chitrangada, Ulupi, Hidimba, Subhadra, Sudeshna, Uttara, Madri, Tillottama, Supriya, Uruvi, Ambika, Ambalika, Urvashi, Devayani, Sharmishtha were considered for study. Ganga is considered as a Goddess who personified herself in human form and became a part of the epic. In this avatar, she was beautiful, attractive, and lured Shantanu to marry her but became a gobbling female and submerged her seven sons into her own water. She emerged as a bold lady who took her own decision and remained static to the result of those decisions. Arjuna married the Naga princess Ulupi, Chitrangada of Manipur, and finally Krishna's sister

Subhadra whom he brought in the palace. Arjuna's marriage with Subhadra, Chitrangada, and Ulupi established important political relationships with other kingdoms. In the same way, Hidimba's marriage with Bhima with the consent of Kunti was also performed to get power and support. Most of these women characters were augmented with brilliance and knowledge. Like the male counterpart of the society, these ladies also possessed deep insight into the matters of decision making. They had excellent understanding of practical life and were treasured with high ethical values and morality. *The Mahabharata* pays its highest tribute to some of these ladies such as 'Dirghadarshini', 'Pandita', 'Brahmavadini', etc. However, the concept of power runs throughout the epic. The main power of society remains in the hands of men but women's voice can be heard from the perspectives of wives, mothers and queens. Husbands and sons have a supreme position in their lives but their voice is not restricted to these boundaries. "This voice is not one-dimensional. It is characterized by multiple, often conflicting and ambiguous discourses struggling to articulate themselves. Not a single queen's voice is, therefore, examinable as a resolved one. There is something about every queen that lingers on after every evaluation has been wrapped up, after every perspective has been mapped. This surplus and indefinite presence of the Queens is the most striking feature of the *Mahabharata*" (Sharma 121).

The fourth chapter "*Women Ascetics and Gurus*" dealt with the women scholars and ascetics who not only kept their head high in the male-dominating arena but also proved better than male scholars. As Van Buitenen observed:

There must have existed scores of more or less isolated little centres where parallel doctrines were being evolved out of a common source. Occasional meetings at pilgrimages and festivals, reports from other and remote ashrams brought by wandering ascetics, polemic encounter with other preachers must have resulted in a laborious process of partial renovation and conversation, more precise definition of doctrines and eclecticism readjustments of terminology etc. (98)

The Mahabharata is not only about the war of Kurukshetra fought between Kauravas and Pandavas for the Hastinapur throne, but it also assimilates so many

myths and stories which form the basis of our faith and philosophy. In our religious scriptures, the earth is personified as the “Bhumi Mata”. She is also worshipped as the “mother of all creatures” because she produces every living being in this world. She is considered “protector of men” (Ganguli 3.114.245). She can be furious, demands worship and sacrifice to calm her. She sometimes feels burdened and asks the death God ‘Mrtyu’ to destroy the human life from the earth. In the epic, the great Goddesses Durga, Parvati (Uma), Lakshmi, Ganga, Saraswati, and Savitri (Gayatri), of the Hindu tradition are also mentioned. Before the war, Krishna asked Arjuna to worship Goddess Durga, “Cleansing thyself, O mighty-armed one, utter on the eve of the battle thy hymn to Durga for (compassing) the defeat of the foe” (Ganguli 6.23.48). Women characters performed various roles successfully in the epic, such as that of mothers, queens, wives, ascetics, artists, and musicians, etc. The picture that emerged from *The Mahabharata* about women is of respect for them. Sulabha, single woman and a Sanskrit scholar won a debate with philosopher king Janaka in the presence of eminent brahmna scholars. In this debate, Sulabha logically established that there is no essential difference between a man and a woman. She also demonstrated by her own example that a woman may achieve liberation by the same means as a man. Feminists did not pay much attention to this episode, while it is important to note that Sulabha being a lady entered the male-dominated field of asceticism and proved herself a true ascetic.

Amba, the princess of Kashi, had stricken a different note of expression of women in the epic. The struggle and loneliness of Amba portrayed another aspect of a woman’s life. In Hinduism, it is a powerful tale of tragedy and revenge. She tolerated many trials and tribulations in her life. Her indomitable spirit for revenge also conveyed the importance of patience. Forgiveness was not shown by Amba towards her tormentor. She fought for her self-respect for centuries. Feminist writer Gita Hariharan’s novel *Thousand Faces of Night* presents her undaunted courage and dedication. Amba got the epithet ‘Incarnation of Penance’ because of her dedicated approach to do penance, seeking revenge against Bhishma. Her fearlessness and resolution represented her as a powerful woman of the epic.

Another ascetic woman of the epic, Shandili, did not appreciate being treated as a sex-object. She was a devout woman who lived like an ascetic's life atop Mount Rishabha. One day Suparna, the divine falcon-God, saw her and entertained the thought of carrying her away. Instantly his golden wings dropped off. Suparna came crashing to the ground and begged Shandili to forgive him as he did not have any intention to molest her. Shandili forgave him and restored his wings.

The story of Madhavi raises many painful questions about the status and treatment of women in a society of the bygone era, which was guided by its own set of values. The captivating but disturbing episode was studied in depth by scholars, feminists, and dramatists from sociological, psychological, and various other angles. Madhavi's episode is severely criticised in the recent times as being insensitive to a woman's feelings, depriving her of any inner space or desire, and wiping out her very individuality as a person. She was robbed of any control over her life. It appears that horses were valued more than women. A woman was given away to different males only to get good horses, which is very shocking. Madhavi was treated as a cow by one male or the other, traded for horses, impregnated and each time forced to leave behind her newborn. At the end, she was neither a wife nor a mother – despite having lived with four men and giving birth to four sons. Madhavi's character is condemnable but ultimately her sufferings led her to the path of salvation. Her clean and detached attitude to her unique encounters with four men perhaps defined her 'virgin' status. At the end of the episode, she exercised her choice without disgust, bitterness or regret; and retired into the woods.

On the concluding note, it can be said that this research answered several important questions regarding women of the epic, their status, their role, their personality, and the society in which they lived, apart from representing them. The points of view of different scholars were used and modified in the Indian context for the present research. Through different stories, *The Mahabharata* speaks of women's life in the epic. Indirectly, it is the women who took decisions, directed the course of events, and decided the fate of men and their generations to follow. Women can be considered as the true and proud heroines of the epic. The three women Satyawati, Kunti, and Draupadi are perhaps the strongest women of the epic who wielded power,

in more than one different ways. *The Mahabharata* is interwoven with their remarkable wisdom, power and leadership. They knew when and how to use their power; and more importantly, when not to knock it down. Though these women did not have any visible authority, they were able to change the different circumstances and influenced the course of events. The narrations in the early part of the epic indicated that women enjoyed a greater degree of freedom. They were invested with authority to take decisions on crucial matters, and were given much respect. As in the case of Madhavi, how she could preserve her independence, and exercise a measure of freedom of thought, and act in a manner that was unique in her times. In the same way, Ganga and Satyawati married on their own conditions. Satyawati, the fisher-maid diverted the direction of the royalty. She triumphed upon Shantanu to guarantee that only her children will succeed to the throne. Kunti and Madri also exercised their freedom to take decisions. Kunti, in particular, exercised control and actively directed the lives of her sons. Gandhari also guided her sons and very often influenced the judgements of Dhritrashtra. As the epic progresses into its middle, there comes a noticeable change in the circumstances and power which influences the position of women. When Draupadi was insulted and humiliated publicly at a gambling game of dice, she got angry and protested, yet she did not allow anybody to show sympathy towards her; rather she demanded justice at any cost. As a mother she tolerated a big blow when her sons were slaughtered while asleep alongside her. At the end, Draupadi, the prime heroine of the epic, was left to die unattended as she stumbled and fell on mountain slopes while none of her five husbands cared to stay with her or to help her. Any kind of maltreatment done to women was considered a sin. Hence, whatever happened with Draupadi in Hastinapur was also a sin and Hastinapur had to pay for it. On the one hand, these women emerged out of the patriarchal system which provided them the space to pursue their way in this world, on the other, they criticised this patriarchal world and its limitations. Madhavi was used by males to satisfy their lust and achieve their motive. All this disturbed her thoughts and she lost interest in this world. When her father performed *swayamvara*, she left it and became an ascetic. Sulabha was discussed in context of the time of King Janaka. She broke all the king's confusion and illusion regarding asceticism and theology. Suvarchala gained the

heights in asceticism without leaving the worldly heights. Duties of these women achieved the heights equal to males in these fields.

The cry of western feminist “that women have been neglected by society in general, and by the Government in particular does not quite appeal to Indian women. They see that the legal safeguards and equal opportunity facilitates that are being fought for in many of the countries which claim long traditions of equality and individual freedom are already available to them in principle. Thus, they react with the feeling that feminism is alien. (Kunjakkan 233)

The Mahabharata is much about women’s role as wife and mother but does not talk much about brother-sister or father-daughter relationship. Polygamy and polyandry both were prevalent during that time but women were respected at home as well as in society. However, in *The Mahabharata*, a very orthodox and traditional pattern of behaviour was expected from women. This can be seen in the speech of Draupadi where she preached the duties of an obedient and virtuous wife to Satyabhama. Woman adorned with chastity considered her husband as a God. She waited and served him with love and care. She surrendered her own will completely to that of her husband. Her heart was also completely devoted to him in as much as she never thought even of any other man. All pleasures of her were only with him. In his absence, all pleasures and wishes were to be banned. These traits indicate the total surrender of a wife to her husband. These instructions direct a woman on the path of sacrifice, dedication, and selflessness.

However, her dedicated and sacrificing nature did not confirm her position as lesser or subsidiary. The position given by the male-dominated society did not justify her role as totally silent or passive character. Undoubtedly, the perspective of Indian women is based somewhere on our tradition and mythological portraits of women. However, *The Mahabharata* was written in a different time with different value system. To judge these women of *The Mahabharata* from western feminist perspective would be totally wrong. These women cannot be marked as ‘suppressed’ or ‘subservient’. No doubt the epic is dominated by men but behind the major decisions and situations, women’s presence of mind and intelligence had great contribution. They were strong and powerful with their determination and strong will.

Women of the epic presented the modern concept of strikingly individualistic feminine consciousness or “female culture”. The feminine struggle for their identity crisis and establishment of self-respect strongly reverberates throughout the epic. Women obeyed the orders of their husband but kept their own personality intact from the shadow of their husband’s existence. Satyawati’s ambitious attitude; Ganga’s taking advantage of situations; Savitri’s undaunted valour; Damayanti’s passions and struggle; Shakuntala’s courage, and boldness; make the epic interesting, instructional, and varied. There were women who belonged to royal families and were queens, mothers, wives, and daughters; and there were others who belonged to an ascetic group, who actually crossed the boundaries of this world and achieved paramount position in religion and asceticism.

The women characters of *The Mahabharata* project bravery and courage. All are optimistic and amazing in their own struggle and ‘self’ establishment. The female characters of *The Mahabharata* are vivid and bright in their royal nature, beauty and energy. Each of them is distinct and indomitable. They have been represented as epitome of femininity and feminism. Immorality, social evils, and injustice exist in all societies whether modern or otherwise, just as the strong, affluent, educated, enlightened, independent, and liberated women do exist in all societies. The epic society was as good or bad as any other society of its time; but it appeared to be a tolerant and moderately unbiased society.

Women have played an important role since the dawn of the civilization. Recently, due to globalisation, the status of women has also changed. Their role now demands more participation in every field of life. Like women of *The Mahabharata*, who just did not sit behind the curtains and watch their men taking all the decisions. Instead, they participated actively in the struggle of life. Such brave ladies are also the need of the present times. An important message that the epic conveys is that women should fight for their rights and equality just as the women of the epic who not only followed their *stridharma* but also raised their voice against injustice done to them. Now, it is the time of reawakening. Women of India have started their journey to establish their identity and being recognised for their potential, talent and capabilities. This is a good beginning, though there is still a long way to go. The process must

improve both in terms of its spread and quality. The principles of equal opportunities for learning and development; equitable position in work-place; and the right to seek out her destiny with honour, must soon find place in all segments of the society.

The women of the Mahabharata are extraordinarily prominent, feisty and individualistic. Their spirit of fighting against injustice reflects the aspect of *shakti* or power, for example Draupadi was never the type who would easily forgive and forget. In the present times, things are only getting worse with global terrorism and unrest in almost all countries of the world. Each *yuga* came with its specification and requirements, hence we cannot really say that these epic women were rebellious or rule breakers. Women of the Mahabharata were powerful; they captured the very sense of true Indian women. They were highly virtuous and beautiful, but simultaneously they were so strong that no calamity could diminish their individuality. It was the need of the hour at that particular moment in history. Indian women even today are expected to stay within the line of control that men draw for them. Many Indian women still face domestic violence because they refuse to obey their husbands. We also hear of many women being humiliated, raped, or even murdered by a potential suitor for having rejected him. The women characters of the epic are symbolic of that courage and determination which is the need of the present hour too. These women are capable of expressing the deep love and tenderness but also stand up against the injustice done to them. Each Indian woman has the potential in her personality that she is capable to fight with the hurdles of life and finally emerges victorious. Though she remains silent in a society that is still largely male dominated yet she manages to struggle and holds her dignity, achieves success, wins the respect and recognition in the society. These epic women tell us that being kind, humble and generous is not just sufficient to live a life with respect, grace, and dignity. Sometimes you have to fight for all these things and no one can stop you if you are determined and passionate about what you want in life. That is what these epic women have proved and taught us: to fight for our rights and not to surrender.