

# EMPOWERED WOMEN IN VYASA'S MAHABHARATA

**DR. ALKA SINGH**

Assistant Professor of English  
Dr. RML National Law University Lucknow  
(UP) INDIA

## ABSTRACT

*This article analyses the various roles women played in their lives in the era of Mahabharata. An analysis of the role of women as a wife and a mother is basic to the select women under study apart from hearing them with connotative staunch voices in directing actions of the plot and plans to communicate meaning in the underlying structures.*

**Key Words:** Mahabharata, Empowerment , Women , Cultural Texts

## INTRODUCTION

There is a big debate on the patterns of women empowerment and their due right in society. Veracity of facts is visible in both sides of the debate of women empowerment in historical context .A majority of scholar pine the tradition of women's subjugation in Indian context . When we go through the pages of the cultural texts of India , a new world view is seen. In this context , it is appropriate to cite Shalini Shah who states :

*One might assert that contrary to the despairing claims of Simone de Beauvoir of women having neither past nor voice, the fact is that patriarchy, entrenched and cherished though it was, could still be subverted and even openly dissented against, and women could articulate their desires and aspirations. It would therefore not be too farfetched to argue that the past was not just about*

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*the gagging of women and their sub ordination, a 'closed' door as it were, but that there were many little windows opening out into the future, giving a tantalising glimpse of unfettered women. These courageous and articulate women, as agents of subversion, have left footprints on the sands of times, which we can follow to chart a new path towards a more equitable future.*

It is quite appropriate to read Mahabharata in this line. Mahabharata, an epic, is one of the greatest Indian cultural texts where we observe several examples of human relations, socio cultural patterns, geo-political concerns of the time evil and righteousness. Mahabharata speaks and establishes the timeless relevance of human thought processes and actions between good and evil and their consequences. The women characters in the epic were modern in their thinking and actions. The Mahabharata is a beautiful text that brings different stories, characters, and timeless themes of human emotions woven into the broader framework of different shades of relationships right from duties to love and war relationships between two threads of a family. It is a poetic representation of many facets of life. This paper while reflects various relationships and statuses of women in a society where women played a significant role during the time of Mahabharata. The epic glorifies Indian women. It presents them as having high moral character. A great number of expressions describe their personality and character beyond their physical beauty. It is interesting to read truths deeply rooted in human society out of their psyche.

This article analyses the various roles women played in their lives during the Mahabharata. An analysis of the role of women as a wife and a mother is basic to the select women under study apart from hearing them with connotative staunch voices in directing actions of the plot and plans to communicate meaning in the underlying structures. Kevin Mc Grath writes in his essay, "Speaking of Truth" that strong evocative speeches by women occur in the epic Mahabharata in times of acute crisis reminding the men of order, dharma, and rightful conduct. In such events, it is the strong-willed women who come across as speakers of truth, setting things straight and reminding the society of the right action, both in word and spirit, that must be adhered to. In his words, "Women in epic Mahabharata more than male heroes speak what is considered to be social truth: what is right for Kshatriyas and what constitutes good behavior. They are called satyavadini 'speakers of truth' or dharmacharini 'one whose conduct is dharmic'. Usually, such speeches are made when a crisis is occurring, and the right demeanor is in question: then a woman will speak, clarifying the situation and exhorting a hero or king who is not acting correctly and without due regard to Kshatriya dharma." (Mc Grath 187)

The first woman interestingly discussed is Amba. She is one of the first voices in the Mahabharata who protests against the idea of swayamvara, an institution that portrayed the choice and freedom of women but was inherently extremely patriarchal, androcentric, and

male-dominated. She protests against the abduction of herself and her two sisters to Bheeshma in the court of Hastinapura refusing to marry Vichitravirya in the swayamvara and declares her affection for King Salva. Therefore, she is one of the initial female voices to challenge authority and instate the idea of choice. When everyone around her fails to take up her case, she performs intense penance, seeks a boon, and decided to avenge her cause. Therefore she becomes an example of a woman who takes power into her own hands similar to Mahasweta Devi's Dopadi.

In the Mahabharata, Kunti is known for her extraordinary bold decisions and parenting. Her character is crucial in the understanding of mothers who fight for the rights of their children. She also becomes the epitome of single parenthood in society and does a brilliant justification for it. Her instructions to Yudhishtira and the rest of the Pandavas at the end of the Uddyoga Parva are imperative for it is here that she reminds her sons and Draupadi through Krishna about the duties of a Kshatriya and the urgent need of taking up arms for one's self. The entire chapter towards the conclusion of Uddyoga Parva makes her one of the astute voices on individual rights. She also protests herself being given in adoption to King Kuntibhoja just as one transfers a piece of an object from one man to another. As a daughter, she raises her voice against female children easily given away in adoption.

Discussion on Gandhari is again relevant to the theme of women as the centre of power discourses. Gandhari stands as a tall figure of reason and rationality in the epic. During the peace treaties when all fails and Krishna's persuasion for peace avails no results, Gandhari is called into the court to convince Duryodhana to boycott the idea of war. Gandhari inspires Iravati Karve who did experiments with the idea of sati. She explains how in the vanaprastha stage of life, it was Gandhari's wish to lead both herself and her husband towards the forest fire that was consuming everything around them. Here we see an image of Shakti who instead of waiting for death to come to her, boldly embraces it and also leads her husband towards it. Such resilience and adherence to speech and action at the last stages of her life is never twice seen in the entire Hindu thought and culture.

Draupadi has enormous potentials in Mahabharata, and controls the entire power discourses and narratives that lead to the war of the Mahabharata. She is presented as pivotal in revitalizing a new dimension towards all other characters about whom much has been said and understood to make her the epic heroine. Draupadi, as the epic progresses, comes to occupy images and elements of several Goddesses from Kali to Vac (the goddess of speech).

Her incessant questions on ownership in the Sabha Parva eventually bring home the idea of human rights that it's not permissible for an individual at any age and time to withhold the rights and freedom of another individual irrespective of gender, caste, class, or nation. She redefined dharma. It's her argument that makes Bheeshma confess that "Dharma is subtle". Her evocative verbal discourse that is both on the ethical and moral plane makes Iravati

Karve call her a 'lady pundit' who fights her case. Like Amba, she blames her father, husband, and even the creator, Madhusudhan for having allowed the calamity of disrobing to unfold. In the VanaParva she's the sole voice who reminds Yudhshithira of the duties of a Kshatriya and a king. She is often called a raft that sails the Pandavas through times of calamity and crisis. She is also the one who insists on the idea of the right punishment when she asks Arjuna and Bheema to go after Ashwathamma for his heinous act of murdering the Pandava army in sleep. There is no doubt that without her evocative speech and constant reminders, the epic and the lives of the characters would not have unfolded the way they have.

The figure of Shakuntala is crucial for she advocates the rightful share of Bharata ( after whom the epic and the race will be named ) to be accepted in the court of Dhushyanta. Shalini Shah states that she's not the docile suffering figure as Kalidas paints her in the play rather is one who accuses the king of having forgotten his martial and fatherly duties. She curses him and states that such a transgression will not just bring him a bad name but shall stain his clan's name. When she says that her birth is mightiest than his, we came to know through her speech why that is so. Sulabha is another independent voice in the epic who redefines the meaning of moksha, language, reality, and true knowledge. The Janaka Sulabha Samvada in the Shantiparva is crucial where she refuted the tall claims of King Janka have attained liberation while occupying the position of a householder. She destabilizes all institutions ranging from caste, gotra, and educational institutions and gives new meanings to all. Not much has been studied in the West or Indian academic, Sulabha is a brahamavadini who in the company of brahmmins articulates her thoughts so well that all are left silent after her narration. She also comes across as an independent woman in her mendicant ravel and voices the fact that since she is a renunciate she does not need the protection of any man in her lifetime. Rashmi Luthra's statement is quite appropriate in this reard when she says , that “ rather than being a dead-end, the epics and their characters are fertile ground for the enunciation of multiple feminisms and their various contradictions within the Indian context, and for the creation of common ground between feminists and Indian women at large.” (Luthra137) She further writes , “The appropriation of the epic narratives by both nonfeminists and feminists, and the critique of these appropriations from within feminist movements, serves to open up an important space for elaborating the meaning of feminisms within the current Indian context.”(Luthra137)

In the light of the above , this extremely brief select study of women in Mahabharata establishes significant instances of strong women voices that define women empowerment in true spirit and sense.

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