

Women's Roles and Agency in the Mahabharata and Ramayana: A Study of Female Characters in Ancient Indian Epics

Abstract

The present paper examines complex women's roles in the Mahabharata and Ramayana with regard to their influence over state power and politics. Complexity in feminine characters is evident, for example, through Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari of the Mahabharata, who make a number of actions and decisions playing a huge role in the epic political narrative. Such heroine characters challenge and reinforce a number of gender norms, reflecting the socio-political dynamics of ancient India.

The *Mahabharat* and *Ramayana* are two of India's most popular epic texts. They are not just of religious significance but of literary importance to social scientists and researchers. The amount of cultural and social influence of the texts is visible in their day-to-day use in people's lives. The thousand years of legacy of these texts have been significant in building a socio-religious and cultural space in Indian society. Both these texts are called *Maha kavyas* by historians and other scholars due to their form and format. The Mahabharata is believed to have been written between 400 BCE and 400 CE, with some scholars stating that its original basic tale may have existed orally as early as the 8th and 9th centuries BCE

¹; and it is the longest epic poem (Maha kavya) in the world, having over 100,000 verses. The Ramayana is generally attributed to having been composed sometime between 500 BCE to 100 BCE, although there are pre-500 BCE oral legends followed by written speculation from the 7th century BCE.

Some authors have theorized about the relevance of the Mahabharata and Ramayana; and some other authors have used them as their subjects of discourse to analyze various themes, characters and modern cultural relevance.²

One of the most popular works on Mahabharata is the critical edition prepared by the scholar Vishnu S. Sukthankar³ in the early 20th century. Sukthankar's edition brought together multiple

versions of the text identified additions and errors and has become the standard scholarly edition of the Mahabharata.

The Mahabharata, one of the most important and comprehensive epics in ancient Indian literature, is claimed to have been written by sage Vyasa. It has over 100,000 *shlokas* (verses), is organised into 18 volumes (Parvas), and tells a complex story which is based on the Kurukshetra War between two groups of cousins, Kauravas and the Pandavas. The Mahabharata not only recounts dynastic conflict and bloodshed, but it also examines deeply philosophical, theological, and moral-ethical debates, including the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text within the epic that addresses the moral dilemmas that the warrior Arjuna, a character in the epic faces (Brockington, 1998).

Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, delves deeply into the epic poem and is another important work on the Mahabharata. Doniger states that the Mahabharata, with its emphasis on *dharma* (responsibility) and the moral battles of its protagonists, presents the complexity and contradictions in Hindu theology and ethics.

Other works in the field of translations are important to mention as these works increased the access of the great epics and subsequently, the literature surrounding it. One such work is by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, who worked on the first complete English translation of the Mahabharata from 1883 to 1896. This translation made the *Maha kavya* easily accessible to the English-speaking world and still is an important resource for reference. English translation by C. Rajagopalachari is also a significant work in translation, as it provides an easier and shorter version of the epic that is widely available to the average reader. Recent scholarly translations, such as those by J. A. B. van Buitenen and Bibek Debroy, provide thorough and detailed interpretations of the text, enhancing its academic scholarship and understanding of this important epic poem (Fitzgerald, 2004).

Ramayana, the other Maha kavya, taken up in the study also has a tremendous amount of scholarly work surrounding it. It is believed that the most authentic and reliable original Sanskrit translation of this text is by Valmiki. It was written in traditional Sanskrit by Valmiki and is believed to morally complex, evocative poetry and nuanced characterization in its text. This work has been referred to by many scholars for a deeper understanding of the text. Valmiki's Ramayana is based on the adventures of or conquests of Rama, its protagonist, who is believed to be an incarnation of God Vishnu. It is composed into seven volumes called *Kandas* and describes Rama's life story of

his banishment, his wife Sita's kidnapping by the demon king and ultimately the *Dharam_Yudh* the moral war, fought between Ravana and Rama for Sita's eventual rescue.

The sage Valmiki is regarded as the Adi Kavi⁴ (first poet) of Sanskrit literature. The Ramayana has had a significant impact on Indian culture, religion, and the arts, it has also significantly influenced the nation's moral and social values over the ages (Goldman, 1984).

Ramayana was translated into English for the first time by Ralph T. H. Griffith in the 19th century. it was then published over the years between 1870 and 1874 according to the *Kandas*. This translation was the first to make the epic widely available to the masses and many more translations have emerged after this. Robert P. Goldman's more modern translation, which started in the 1980s, is known for its grammatical clarity and scientific rigour and provides a genuine English translation of Valmiki's work.

Another famous work in regards to Ramayana is A.K. Ramanujan's "Three hundred Ramayana's."⁵ This work was initially presented in the form of an essay at a conference in Cambridge and was later published in books related to ancient Indian history. Multiple retellings and interpretations are explored by Ramanujan in this text and this goes to show the rich and diverse character of the text itself. Ramanujan's work also questions the idea of a single authoritative version of the Ramayana and emphasizes the significance of looking at the epic as a dynamic and developing cultural narrative.

Mahabharata and Ramayana have been adapted and retold in literature across a variety of cultural and literary contexts apart from scholarly work on these epics. These different adaptations ranging from modern books, television series, movies and anime highlight the cultural and social significance of the epics along with their popularity. For instance, "Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata" by Devdutt Pattanaik presents a contemporary, visually captivating retelling of the epic by fusing traditional narration with modern drawings.

Epics as Gender Commentaries

Mahabharat and Ramayana are widely researched for their unique gender equations. For example, the Mahabharata epic is not just a story of a dynastic struggle for power between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, but it also contains complex and nuanced portrayals of gender dynamics. It portrays the complex relationships of its characters like Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari etc. with the state and politics and as individual women in the society of the time.

Mahabharat, an old Indian epic story explains different ways women are depicted in its plot thus bringing out their societal standing or presentation. As the narration proceeds, it introduces several female characters who face different difficulties along their path.

The epic introduces a good number of female characters who pass through different challenges and triumphs, thus offering a deep understanding of gender dynamics, social expectations and personal agency. Starting from the well-known Draupadi to the immovable Gandhari, it is not only women in Mahabharata that determine its fate but also symbolise vigour, invincibility and divinity amongst others. This paper explores how women are depicted in the Mahabharata; it focuses on their roles, interpersonal relations, suffering and empowerment within the context of the epic narrative at one hand as well as examines their stories' ongoing relevance in this era.

As previously mentioned, Wendy Doniger's "Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from Sanskrit" is an important book in the study of gender in the Mahabharata. Doniger thoroughly examines the epic, focusing on how gender roles and relationships are constructed and challenged throughout the plot. She claims that the Mahabharata is more than just a chronicle; it also reflects ancient India's social and cultural customs. The relationship between Draupadi and her five husbands in a time when women were expected to be devoted to one husband or Kunti's relationship with her husband and his wives is part of this complex narrative.

Scholars, such as Ruth Vanita, investigate the homoerotic subtext in the Mahabharata in her study "Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society". Vanita contends that same-sex desire and relationships are frequent in Indian literature, particularly the Mahabharata, challenging traditional notions of gender and sexuality in ancient India.

Hiltebeitel's book "The Cult of Draupadi, Volume 1: Mythologies: From Gingee to Kurukshetra" explores how Draupadi's identity transformed from being an epic character to a respected deity in different parts of India. According to him, "Draupadi is one of the most magnetic and enigmatic characters in the Mahabharata". Hiltebeitel's extensive mythological research underscores the agency of Draupadi; by which she overcomes traditional gender stereotypes. Draupadi's story offers a lens through which to examine notions of female power and resilience in ancient Indian society" asserts Hiltebeitel (2001). In addition, the diversity of Indian religious traditions has been shaped by regional differences with regard to Draupadi character, rites, rituals and myths accordingly.

In popular culture, the gender dynamics of Mahabharat have gone beyond academic studies. For instance, B.R. Chopra directed 'Mahabharat' an Indian television series that was lauded for presenting heroes like Kunti and Draupadi as strong women who helped to shape the plot of this great epic. Divakaruni reimagines the epic through Draupadi's perspective highlighting her agency and complexity as a woman who lives under patriarchy. This feminist reclamation of the Mahabharata throws new light on the epic's gender relations.

Moreover, Devdutt Pattanaik in "Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata" provides a visual and accessible retelling of the ancient text which includes its gender relations. Pattanaik's paintings and discussion illuminate how characters of opposite sexes interrelate in the Mahabharata story to make readers change their stereotypical views about gender roles.

These days there has been an increase in digital humanities tools used to study Gender dimensions of Mahabharata. Digital tools allow researchers to analyze large volumes of text efficiently, identifying patterns, themes, and representations of gender across different versions and translations of the Mahabharata.

The book "Virtual Epics: Gender and Sexuality in the Mahabharata" by Madhree Thng explores language and imagery in the epic using computer-based techniques, unveiling underlying interpretations and subtexts about gender and sexuality. The overall theme of this article is that the works discussed demonstrate various approaches to gender representation and interpretation within the Mahabharata. A number of feminist narrations have been supplemented by queer readings, including a series of scholarly projects as well as more literary ones that offer fresh

perspectives on complex male-female relationships in this ancient Indian narrative. This study revealed that scholars looking into gender dynamics in Indian culture as well as society still find inspiration and research methods from the Mahabharata.

The representation of women in Mahabharata and Ramayana shows their diverse roles, strengths, and complexities, offering valuable insights into gender dynamics and societal norms prevalent during their time. The representation of women in the Mahabharata and Ramayana is a complex and multifaceted issue, as explored in a range of studies. Tyagi (2024) and Luthra (2014) both highlight the struggle of marginalized women in these epics, with Tyagi specifically noting the reframing of minor women characters as protagonists who challenge societal norms. Pathak (2023) and Pillai (2023) both emphasize the power and agency of certain women characters, such as Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, and Madhvi, in the face of patriarchal dominance. These studies collectively underscore the importance of reinterpreting these ancient texts to highlight the strength and resilience of their female characters.

Women in the Mahabharata and Ramayana have been portrayed as important characters who contribute much towards the development of the story and other people. Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari are the major female characters that appear in the epics under consideration, and each of their stories brings out different dimensions of women's roles in ancient Indian society.

The female protagonist Sita, the heroine of Ramayana epitomizes the ideal Indian woman, dedicated, absolved loyal, and steadfast to her principles. As Wendy Doniger observes, Sita is the paragon of wifely fidelity and virtue, her trials and tribulations highlight the expectations and challenges faced by women⁶ Besides, Sita's bravery and mental strength after the exile and subsequent ordeals have inspired women for centuries. For instance, her abduction by Ravana and faith in Rama even after years of captivity demonstrates her patience and goodness. Virtue is an integral part of her character, whose legacy finds its continuity for many Indian women even in contemporary times. Similarly, Mahabharata unfolds a host of striking characters moving across intricate moral shades and societal binds. Whereas Draupadi, wife to the Pandavas, characterizes herself as a woman rising beyond the confines of women's empowerment, demonstrating a resilient identity.

First and foremost, she is a woman full of substance, for it is not just poise that underscores her unwavering determination, especially in that dice game, but one who challenges all gender stereotypes that existed at this time. The strength and fortitude that Draupadi shows, more specifically in the context of public humiliation, mark her as a central figure of defiance and resilience in the epic,⁷ suggests Emily Hudson. Draupadi's question to the assembly at the game of dice, "Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?", attacks the ethical and moral fibre of the male-dominated court and points to her strength and unyielding spirit. Kunti and Gandhari themselves embody maternity with the consequent emotional turmoil that accompanies it due to familial responsibilities and expectations. For Alf Hiltebeitel⁸, Kunti's and Gandhari's stories underline the profound emotional and moral struggles of mothers at the critical junctures through which the epic events unfold; Kunti's decision to reveal Karna's true identity only after his death, Gandhari's curse on Krishna for destroying her sons are powerful emotional roles with far-reaching consequences.

Arvind Sharma argues the epics serve as a mirror to the societal norms of their time, allowing contemporary scholars to explore the evolving dynamics of gender roles.⁹ The representation of women in these epics revolves around their roles as wives and mothers¹⁰ mostly. Their identity is created through their relationship with men.¹¹ The resilience and virtue also come from the boundaries of these relationships. Their projection as individuals and women is also for the larger goal of becoming wives and mothers of great men in the future.

Marriage and Family Dynamics

The concept of marriage in the Mahabharata and Ramayana is deeply rooted in spiritual and religious connotations, as explored by Sikka (2013). The ancient Indian epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana, provide deep insights into the dynamics of marriage and family relationships in Hindu society. These texts, which are considered sacred scriptures in Hinduism, explore the complexities of human relationships and the moral dilemmas that arise within them. In both epics, marriage is depicted as a sacred institution that forms the foundation of family life, and the character's actions and decisions ultimately shape the course of their relationships and define the dynamics of their families.

In the Mahabharata, marriage plays a central role in the plot, as the epic revolves around the rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two branches of the same royal family. The marriage of Draupadi to the five Pandavas brothers is a key event in the epic, highlighting the complexities of polyandry and the challenges that arise from sharing a wife among multiple husbands. The dynamics of the Pandavas family are further complicated by their relationships with other wives, such as Shubadhara and Hidimbi, and the conflicts that arise between them.¹²

The relationship between Draupadi and the other Pandava wives was always complex and strained. Although she was her husband's first wife among the five brothers, Draupadi held an extremely powerful, almost paramount position within the family. This became the cause of envy and constant strife taken out on her by the other wives, who felt shadowed and sidelined by Draupadi's presence¹³ Yet, Draupadi still tried to unite and integrate with the women of the household, realizing there needed to be solidarity in the home. One of the most popular accounts of Draupadi's friction with the other wives is during their exile. And when Draupadi was being undressed and dishonoured by Duryodhana in the Hastinapur court, other Pandava wives failed to stand up for her rescue or even to condole with her. This lack of solidarity began to crack, as Draupadi felt forsaken and betrayed by fellow wives at the moment when she needed them most. Yet, Draupadi's strength and resilience helped her survive and further rise in her defence and for her rights amidst antipathy from the other wives.

As the great epic of the Mahabharata goes on, we get to see moments of friendship and understanding between Draupadi and others—warring wives of Pandavas who have a special bond of being part of a family that only they own. Thus, they all underwent trials and travails in the end, together, and through this process, their relationships evolved and changed. Draupadi's character as a very strong woman was sure to challenge the normative societal law and expectation, but she stood in the end as a standing example of unity and sisterhood with the wives of Pandavas in adversity.

The Ramayana stands out by going into more detail about Rama and Sita's marriage, which shows love, respect, and loyalty. Their relationship faces challenges when Rama gets exiled, and Sita gets kidnapped by Ravana, the demon king. This leads to separation and Rama's war against Ravana.

Despite these problems, Rama and Sita become an example of marital devotion and loyalty in Hindu society.

Both the Mahabharata and the Ramayana show how siblings interact in marriage and family life. In the Mahabharata, the fight between brothers—the Pandava and Kaurava—starts a war that wipes out the Kuru dynasty. The brothers' jealousy, pride, and ambition fuel their conflicts. This highlights how family disagreements can tear people apart and why families need to work together. In the Ramayana, Rama, Lakshmana, and Bharata show loyalty, sacrifice, and brotherly love, which keep their family together. Rama and his brothers stay loyal to each other and overcome all attempts to break their family's unity.

Marriage and family, thus, as mirrored in these two great epics – the Mahabharata and Ramayana – flesh out the social facts and values of ancient Indian society. In both epics, the role of womanhood is shown to be invaluable for the progress of the events by identifying themselves with husbands, children, and so on. The characters in these epics were bound by their duty to the family and traditional values like dharma, karma, and moksha. Therefore, collectively, the Mahabharata and Ramayana delineate a somewhat convoluted and multi-dimensional portrait of marriage and family existence in Hindu society, having numerous relationships and situations that portray the human experience in its very stimulating variety and richness.

Sisterhood and Kinship Bonds

In both the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the themes of sisterhood and kinship bonds play a crucial role in shaping the narrative and the actions of the characters. In the Mahabharata, the relationship between Draupadi and her brother Dhrishtadyumna is a prime example of strong sibling bonds that transcend societal norms and expectations. Dhrishtadyumna is fiercely protective of his sister, even going so far as to participate in the great war of Kurukshetra in order to avenge her humiliation at the hands of the Kauravas

In the Ramayana, Sita is depicted as a "powerful and intelligent character, capable of making her own decisions and standing up for what she believes in" (Kane, 2021, p. X). Despite being portrayed as a meek and obedient wife, Sita demonstrates her intelligence through her ability to solve complex problems and navigate difficult situations. She shows great comprehension in

understanding the motives and actions of those around her, which allows her to make informed choices that ultimately shape the outcome of the epic. One of the examples is her relationship with her sisters. Sita's sisters in the Ramayana also play important roles in the story, each possessing unique qualities and strengths. While they may not be as prominent as Sita herself, they still contribute significantly to the narrative through their actions and decisions. Through their interactions with Sita and other characters, they demonstrate their intelligence and comprehension, adding depth and complexity to the overall storyline.

Overall, the portrayal of Sita and her sisters in the Ramayana showcases the diverse range of qualities and abilities that women possess. By highlighting their intelligence and comprehension, the epic challenges traditional gender roles and stereotypes, presenting a more nuanced and multifaceted depiction of female characters

Similarly, in the Ramayana, the relationship between Sita and her sister Urmila is a testament to the deep connection that siblings share. Despite being separated by circumstances beyond their control, Urmila remains loyal and steadfast in her love for her sister, even going so far as to remain in a state of self-imposed exile alongside her husband Lakshmana in order to ensure the safety of Sita during her captivity by Ravana. Her fourteen years of self-imposed exile helped her for quest her individual identity in which she would be able to establish herself as a learned scholar. Urmila's quest for knowledge and the power of self-consideration brings an attitudinal shift in her personality and transforms her into a contemporary woman.¹⁴.

Both epics also highlight the complex dynamics of sisterhood, particularly in the case of Sita and her sisters, Urmila and Mandavi. While Urmila chooses to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of her sister's welfare, Mandavi stands by her husband Bharata and supports him in his duties as the ruler of Ayodhya. These contrasting portrayals of sisterhood illustrate the diverse roles and responsibilities that women play within the family structure in ancient Indian society.¹⁵ Both these women also show their devotion to their husbands, which influences the decisions they make during the whole story. For example, while Laxman the younger brother of Rama is devoted to his brother, his wife also devotes herself to the years of seclusion without her husband and Mandavi whose husband becomes the king in the absence of Rama becomes a committed queen to support

him in his responsibilities. While their love for their sister is immense the focus of the epic is on the sisters being good wives rather than good sisters.

Woman's Relationship with the State

Thumb rule in women's relationship with the State in ancient Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, indeed is complex. These texts develop a vibrant portrait regarding the functions and status of women in society and their relationship with the ruling authority and political institutions.

Evidence that female characters are portrayed as potent agents within the political sphere is found in both the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Take, for example, the Ramayana, in which it is Queen Kaikeyi who largely controls the action of the play insofar as she can manipulate her husband, King Dasharatha, to ensure that her son Bharata inherits the throne. Similarly, Queen Draupadi in the Mahabharata is portrayed as a strong and commendable woman who further challenges the eminence of the male rulers and henceforth plays an important role in the succession crisis of the Kuru dynasty. Likewise, there are five admirable women in power and politics as depicted in the Mahabharata and Ramayana- Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari in both epics.

These are five special women of extraordinary power, wisdom, dedication, and sacrifice, who have been recognized across stretches of Indian civilization. It will be grossly unfair to them to treat them as women only. On the one hand, their lives were influenced by some brave, power-hungry warriors. Still, on the other hand, all of these women have emerged as the political entities involved in the intricacies of war from behind and not merely as observers of incidents of war. All these characters enjoyed more power than one may perceive from these epics. It vindicates that it is the power which mattered more than gender notwithstanding the fact that patriarchy remained as an influential force in the society. Though women protagonists of epics possess agency and are influential in their own right, they too are subjected to patriarchal norms and constraints imposed by the State. This is evident in the case of Sita in the Ramayana, who had to be exiled by her husband Rama on account of slandering gossip that raised doubts about her character. Draupadi in

the Mahabharata is also humiliated and abused at the hands of princes of Kauravas, who consider her as a sort of commodity, which might be gambled away in a game of dice.

The epics do contain examples of breaking out and subverting the relationship between women and the State. For example, Sita challenges Rama's authority and insists on independence from him by demanding that she be tested for purity before being accepted into his kingdom in the Ramayana. Similarly, Draupadi in Mahabharata does not passively accept humiliation but demands justice for injustices done to her. While women in the epics are portrayed as strong and influential figures, yet they remain circumscribed within the patriarchal structures of the State. Thus, in Ramayana, Sita had to go through the fire test to execute her purity, when she had already been proved innocuous by the gods themselves.

Similarly, Draupadi in the Mahabharata is helpless against the harassment inflicted upon her and is redeemed only through divine interference in the person of Lord Krishna.

In Ramayana and Mahabharata, the conception of women in relationship with the State reveals complex and ambivalent attitudes of ancient Indian society pertaining to women, power, and authority. While otherwise depicted as powerful and influential figures in society, women are also bound to the norms of patriarchal authority that tend to limit their agency and autonomy. It is in such epic narratives that women, through acts and interactions with the political institutions of the State, come to upset and perturb established ideas of power and authority while foregrounding the complexities of gender relations in ancient India.

Societal Expectations and Patriarchal Norms

In epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, women's roles in rituals are often portrayed as central to maintaining societal order and ensuring the success of royal and domestic life.¹⁶ The Indian epic Ramayana is a text deeply rooted in the expectations of society and patriarchal norms characteristic of ancient India. It tells the story of Prince Rama, who embarks on a journey to rescue his wife, Sita, from the clutches of the demon king Ravana. Throughout the epic, we see how the characters adhere to the strict social norms and expectations that govern their lives. One

of the major ways through which Ramayana enforces societal expectations is by way of its portrayal of the concept of dharma, or duty.

Another feature of Ramayana reflecting the patriarchal setup of the society is that it is an extremely patriarchal script. Women are supposed to be subjugated to their husbands and fathers, and the vision of their principal function is rated as that of a good wife and mother. Take Sita, for example. She is the ultimate example of the perfect wife who sacrifices her happiness for the sake of her husband's honour. Her loyalty and devotion to Rama have been considered exemplary virtues for all women to emulate. According to Wendy Doniger, Sita's unwavering loyalty and submission to Rama epitomize the idealized virtues expected of women in a patriarchal society¹⁷. Another patriarchal norm visible in Ramayana is male superiority and control over women. In essence, Rama is regarded throughout the epic as the highest authority; and accordingly, his word is law. He makes decisions independently, mostly sealing the fates of other people in his environment, his wife Sita included. This power dynamic serves to remind one that men are the dominant gender in society, and women must learn to look up to them in authority.

The character of Ravana represents patriarchal values in that he is portrayed as the main evil of the epic, trying to enslave Sita against her free will. All his actions could be understood as those which break the societal normative structure of respectful coexistence with women and have to be penalized finally due to arrogance and lack of self-control. The fact that Ravana failed to respect Sita's autonomy and lost is meant to suggest that those who violate the accepted norms of society and ethical codes lose.¹⁸

In the Mahabharata, one of the central themes is the concept of dharma, pertaining to duties and moral obligations individuals are supposed to adhere to in society. However, the interpretation of dharma has often been tinged by these very patriarchal norms that set out what roles and responsibilities were for men and women. In the Mahabharata, we see how the male characters are expected to be brave, assertive, and dominant, while the female characters are often portrayed as submissive, obedient, and nurturing.¹⁹

The character of Draupadi reflects the expectations of women in society within the epic. Draupadi is portrayed as a chaste and virtuous lady who has gone through several humiliations and injustices at different junctures of the narrative. Her struggles at the hands of the Kauravas during the infamous dice game, in which she is publicly disrobed, reveals the aggressive patriarchy that allowed abuse of women in ancient Indian society.²⁰

The institution of marriage in the Mahabharata extends sexist principles to women, who are expected to be committed to their husbands. One example of a woman who gave up her happiness and desires for the sake of her husband and his kingdom is the character Gandhari, wife of King Dhritarashtra. In spite of her personal reservations, Gandhari does what a true wife and mother is expected to do in India; and in the process, she becomes a model of societal expectation from women in marriages.²¹

At the same time, there are instances throughout the Mahabharata where characters go against or subvert one's expectations for traditional gender roles. Take Kunti for example, the Pandavas' mother. Her actions reflect decisiveness and courage when making difficult decisions to ensure her son's safety and future safe passage. Her role as a mother is also part of stereotypical roles given to women of a mother who does everything to protect her children in the absence of a father. This understanding is still culturally prevalent in modern times.

Furthermore, what the Mahabharata does is to work out problems at the intersectional level in terms of power, privilege, and gender with respect to the political and social order. The formation of toxic masculinity and feeling of entitlement, as concretized in Duryodhana's character, the firstborn son of Dhritarashtra and the Kauravas leader, ended up in his fall. His actions, driven by a quest for power and control over others, relate to the most harmful consequences of patriarchal values—rise to aggression and dominance.

The influence of patriarchy can also be well located within family ties and relations in the Mahabharata. It is basically fueled by patriarchal notions of inheritance, succession, and legitimacy between Pandavas and Kauravas. The pursuit of power and recognition runs through conflict, betrayal, and tragedy. It emphasizes the fact that Patriarchal norms that do exist are rather of a

destructive type: those that prefer competition and control at the expense of compassion and cooperation.²²

The Mahabharata also brings out certain vital issues regarding the role that women have played in shaping and challenging patriarchy in society. The characters of Kunti, Draupadi, and Subhadra, among others, band together and show resilience, courage, and intelligence in treading through the lakhs of societal compulsions that have come to entrap them. The actions and decisions they take play out to frame the epic narrative and recognize the agency and autonomy that exist with women, given that structures such as patriarchy work toward reducing their power and influence.²³

Struggles for Independence and Autonomy

Ramayana illustrates many struggles related to the independence and autonomy of women. In the whole epic, the character of Sita symbolizes the challenges and hurdles of a woman in asserting her independence and autonomy.

One of the greatest struggles for women's independence is Sita's ordeal in the forest. Succumbing to pressure from his subjects, Rama sends Sita into the forest despite her protests of innocence. This act succinctly shows the lack of agency that women had in society since Sita is forced to comply with Rama's decision despite her being so blameless for the events which had transpired.²⁴

Furthermore, Sita's captivity in Ravana's kingdom brings out the danger women were exposed to in a male-dominated society. Though brave and resilient, Sita is depicted to have undergone various forms of abuse and humiliation while in captivity. This shows how vulnerable women were and continue to be in a patriarchal society. Her struggle to uphold dignity and integrity amidst adversities presents a moving case of the challenges women faced in asserting independence.

Even Sita's reunion with Rama after her rescue from Ravana is a scene used to depict women's lack of freedom. Although she loved Rama so selflessly, Sita had to be brought out for an *agnipariksha*, trial by fire, for proving her chastity. In this process of humiliation, there was brought out the establishment's lack of trust and respect towards women in society. Sita was put to a test to validate her fidelity.²⁵

The epic also narrates the character of Sita as she wrestles with questions of identity and self-worth in a world that attempts to contain and define her. It is through her choice to follow Rama to exile, her refusal to take another husband after having recovered from Ravana's captivity, and her eventual choice to return to the earth from whence she came that underlines her agency regarding consciousness of society and its norms.

The character of Kaikeyi, Rama's stepmother, is very much that of struggling for women's independence and self-determination. Kaikeyi manipulating her husband, King Dasharatha, to get the throne for her son Bharata showcases the agency and guile of women in a man's world. Traditional gender expectations are challenged by the actions of Kaikeyi when she turns up as this strong, influential voice with power in the political sphere.

Surpanakha, Ravana's sister, depicts even more the struggles that women face in asserting their individuality and autonomy in the Ramayana. Surpanakha's unrequited love for Rama, followed by mutilation at the hands of Rama and his brother Lakshmana, highlights what occurs when women aspire and have ambitions in patriarchal societies.

The autonomy and independence of women are also debated in the person of Mandodari, the wife of Ravana in Ramayana. The personality of Mandodari generally projects the loyalty of the wife towards the husband despite his villainous acts and thereby brings forth the limitations of woman's agency in a world focusing on male power and dominance. Mandodari's attempt to reason with Ravana and dissuade him from the path of annihilation is wrongly presented as the challenges women face in trying to be independent in a patriarchal world ruled by male authority.²⁶

Overall, seeing the struggles for women's independence and autonomy in the Ramayana is complicated, and expectations of those same women from ancient India were more often than not arranged under duress. Characters such as Sita, Kaikeyi, Surpanakha, and Mandodari, among others, brought out different angles of a woman's effort to claim her rights or enjoy autonomy within what was otherwise a patriarchal society—hence reflecting the plurality of challenges and methods of manoeuvring that women had to face in their claims for autonomy. Their stories are a strong reminder of the lasting resilience and strength of women facing inequality and oppression.

Scholars view wisely the Mahabharata as an ancient Indian epic, in such a rich tapestry of disparate narratives, characters, and philosophies, there lie several tales that have the power to continue in their popularity with audiences. One among several repetitive insights that are aspects of the Mahabharata is that of women fighting against the odds for independence and autonomy. The women characters in the Mahabharata have been portrayed as multidimensional human beings who oscillate between a societal expectation and the draining of persons, on the one hand, and the assertion of agency and autonomy on the other.

Draupadi, as a fierce and determined princess, spoke out against the patriarchal order by insisting on having a say in choosing a husband for herself. It is quite exemplary to find Draupadi continuing to strut at a time when society and family are putting more pressure than ever to yield to having a right to agency and autonomy over her personal life.²⁷

Another character who struggles much in the Mahabharata for independence and autonomous choice is Kunti, the mother of the Pandava brothers. Amongst others, Kunti reflects an intelligent, enterprising woman who steers through convoluted power relations within home and society. Her struggles for independence begin most visibly in her relationships with sons and husbands, wherein constantly she finds it difficult to settle between what she wants to do and what is expected from a woman.²⁸

A major example of women wrestling for independence in the Mahabharata is Gandhari, wife of King Dhritarashtra. She stands as a tragic figure who has sacrificed her happiness, desires, and even life itself to be a wife and queen. Though Gandhari was in love with her husband, she failed to assert independence and autonomy before the overwhelming power dynamics of family and society.²⁹

Apart from these personal issues, much more prominent is the question of independence and autonomy which the Mahabharata stands for as a representative of women in society. It was a patriarchal society where often the women had been belittled and harnessed—oppressed and their agency reduced by the social norms and expectations set for both sexes.³⁰ At the same time,

however, the Mahabharata beautifully exemplifies how women could rise against tightened conventions to force their way toward independence and autonomy in many ways.

One of the ways women in the Mahabharata go ahead fighting for independence is acts of defiance and rebellion. Women like Draupadi and Kunti challenge the most in-built gendered roles and expectations of time by articulating against injustice and laying claim to be treated as individual subjects with rights.³¹ Hence, despite their refusal to take part or remain consistent with such norms and expectations in society, they forge for themselves chinks of agency and autonomy within patriarchy.

Another critical factor of women's struggles for independence in the Mahabharata has to do with female relationships and alliances. Women are very often found developing very strong relationships among themselves and sustaining each other in their encounters against oppression and marginalization. It is through such relationships that they can bargain with the complex play of power institutionalized in society and struggle for independence and self-management in collective ways.³²

Thus, against all the odds and challenges laid before the women of the Mahabharata, this epic stands as a witness to unwarranted episodes of hope and possibility. Women like Draupadi, Kunti, and Gandhari could find spaces to be independent agents through acts of defiance against the socially set norms and expectations. Kunti's relationship with her fellow wives and her daughter-in-law is one example of such solidarities. They inspire women to future generations to stand up at the forefront of agitations for gender equality and women's rights.

It is through acts of defiance, rebellion, and solidarity that women in this epic assert their agency and autonomy despite countless odds and challenges.

Women as Catalysts for Change

Women played the role of catalyzers for change in the story—good or bad—by ordaining destinies of mortals or immortals and charting turns the war would take, which reveals what women had done in that case within the Mahabharata.

One of the prominent characters among the fairer sex in the great epic of Mahabharata is Draupadi, wife of the Pandavas. It so happened that Draupadi married all five brothers during the *swayamvara* (Marriage ceremony to choose the groom), and inaugurated the great battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Added to this fierce disposition, so strong in her resolution to stand as a loving wife to her five husbands, Draupadi initiated the Pandavas into recapturing their kingdom, to fight for justice against enemies. That is what makes Draupadi, with her strength and resilience in times of adversity, a potent agent of change throughout the epic.³³

Another one of the major female characters in Mahabharata is Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas. Kunti exercises the boon given by the gods to her parent by giving birth to different gods' children, which makes quite a difference in the kind of destiny the Pandavas themselves end up having. Her act makes the birth of the Pandavas and the Kuravas begin, and consequently, the most epic Kurukshetra battle. Kunti's wisdom and foresight guide her sons through trials and tribulations to victory in war³⁴

Gandhari is another influential female character throughout Mahabharata, happening to be the wife of King Dhritarashtra and the mother to the Kauravas. The blindfold now becomes a powerful signifier of a sacrificing mother's love, as she shares in the sufferings of her sons. In this sense, Gandhari's blind devotion to sons and helplessness due to her using a blindfold keep recurring as powerful symbols of sacrificing motherhood. Her constant support for the ambitions of her sons and her inability to vocally denounce their misdeeds turn out to be eventually the cause of their downfall. As a catalyst, that is a role in change, it proves tragic by bringing destruction for her family³⁵ The princesses of Kashi, Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika, will also turn out to be important change agents in terms of the progression of events within the Mahabharata. The rejection of Amba by Bhishma and her consequent quest for revenge against him provokes a chain of events that will result in her rebirth as Shikhandini, an important Pandava ally during the war. The fates of their children—the Kauravas and the Pandavas—are decided by the inner conflicts and choices of Ambika and Ambalika. The actions they play as mothers and daughters are very potent catalysts of change throughout the epic

Different and intricate, the catalysts of change the women of Mahabharata create are meant to set in motion the fate of the characters and the turn towards the epic war. From Draupadi's fiery determination to Kunti's wisdom and foresight, from Gandhari's tragic devotion to Satyawati's political acumen, all women shed their fragrance of individuality in the epic narrative. It is their acts that move the plot forward, shaping the fates of heroes and villains alike, right up to the epic climax of the Mahabharata. The women in the Mahabharata will thus no longer be the silent witnesses to or passive victims of fate but come out as willing participants in this epic drama whose course is shaped by their acts and words. These women, thus, become potent factors for change with strength, wisdom, and sacrifice, forming hence a timeless and enduring epic of human drama that constitutes the Mahabharata.

In Ramayana as well women have been the catalysts of change. They accelerate the course of action and determine the character's destiny. Sita is one of the immortal women characters of Ramayana and is Rama's wife. Sita's undeterred devotion to Rama and refusal to yield to Ravana's charms wring from him the strength to wage a battle to win her back, and thus Ravana is defeated. The role of Sita as some sort of catalyst in effecting change can be seen by provoking Rama into action, challenging him regarding the fulfilment of his prince and husband duties. She refused to go back to him after her expulsion from the kingdom on the questions of her character. She chose to go back to her origins 'earth' where she came from. This also shows women were not mere oppressed entities of patriarchy they did have the strength to stand their ground when they wanted in the epic. This does not cover the fact that women like Sita and Ahilya have been continuously asked to prove their righteousness and character throughout the epic.

Another important female character in the Ramayana is Kaikeyi, Rama's stepmother. Here, Kaikeyi's demand of King Dasaratha finally results in the exile of Rama to the forest for fourteen years. The acts of Kaikeyi not only carry the plot further but also act as a catalyst in changing Rama from a prince into a king. Exile to Rama is a turning point since it forces him to turn to his inner self and embellish the characteristics of a leader so that someday, he would finally be able to return to Ayodhya and resume his rightful place on the throne.³⁶

Finally, Mandodari, Ravana's wife, acts as an agent of change for transformation in the Ramayana. Thus, her wisdom and compassion balance the ego and arrogance of Ravana, begging him to have

a change of heart and attain salvation. Eventually, Mandodari's intervention allows Ravana to have his moment of realization before death, thus respecting the power of the female characters to inspire a moment of introspection and growth into the hardest of hearts.

Conclusion

The Mahabharata and Ramayana, as epics, are deeply elaborative on the roles carried out by women within the spheres of state power and politics, shattering the traditional narration of passive female roles that were laid down in ancient Indian society. Here, one finds elaborate female characters such as Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Kaikeyi, and others whose decisions or actions made a great dent in the political landscapes of those respective times.

While Sita and Draupadi are the most discussed characters of the epics when it comes to women. They are the leading characters in the epic as well. Their cultural significance can be seen and day to day life even now. While in Ramayana the leading lady is portrayed as sublime and obedient, whose loving nature defines her as sister, wife and mother, only at the end does Sita take a stand for herself and defies the final request of Rama to come back to him and his kingdom. Women are continuously questioned for their character and morals throughout the epic. It starts with Kaikeyi. Kaikeyi had the right to demand anything of the king as the king Dasharatha promised her three blessings. But later when she asked it was expected of her that she keep these demands within limits and think of the family as a woman. Why was it assumed³⁷ that she wouldn't ask for the kingdom when the right time came? Why were all her good deeds and love for the king and his family forgotten when she demanded that her son become the king? Why was the manipulation only used for her demands with the king and not how she was herself manipulated by someone? She was the only character in the epic who enjoyed some amount of political power and had some control over the state.

Another character whose story reflects how women were blamed for everything wrong without questioning the other parties involved was a norm in Ramayana is Ahilya. Ahilya's character has to take the wrath of her husband when she did not even commit a crime. She was manipulated by the god himself who changed into her husband to have a physical relationship with her.

Surpanakha is one of the most independent characters of the epic who professes her love independent of her family and asserts her right to choose her beloved as a woman in turn Surpanakha is turned into a demoness for asserting these rights. Implying that the women from the civilized world are not this free and independent in professing their feelings.

Women characters in the Mahabharata are also molded to suit the patriarchal expectations and they also speak the language that suits patriarchy. They are generally idealized as mothers, wives, daughters and daughters-in-law. Their total existence is in relation to the men in their lives and they are generally devoid of an independent identity. Women submitting to patriarchal norms are respected, like Kunti as a mother and Draupadi as a wife. Amba dared to challenge the patriarchal norms by expressing her love for Shalva and her life is full of suffering. But no guarantee submitting to the patriarchal norms brings happiness. Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari suffered throughout their lives. In a dialogue between Draupadi and Satyawat during the period of Pandvas's exile, Draupadi seems to be becoming a spokesperson of patriarchy as she describes the ideal woman to Satyawat.³⁸

Further, Both Mandodari and Gandhari, are shown as two women who are devoted to their husbands even when they are wrong in their deeds and they are both devotees of the god who kept their husbands/sons safe from the wrath of their wrongdoing by their devotion and blessings. In whatever circumstances the role of women with their male relations does not change whether the male relations are right or wrong which seems to be the underlying theme of both these epics.

Both these epics show women in a patriarchal apparatus and women are raised and expected to behave according to the regressive societal norms. They have limited say in the working of the state/ kingdom and are expected to be good wives, daughters and mothers. While Draupadi in Mahabharata more than any other character has an equal say in political strategizing along with her husbands. Women have hardly been seen having any sort of relationships beyond familial bonding. One of the most liberating relationships shown in the epic of Draupadi's relationship with Krishna. A friendship which is covered in garbs of a relationship between God and its devotee rather than a friendship between a man and woman. While there are some instances of women asserting their freedom from patriarchy and male-dominated society these instances are not norms

in the epics. Only the most privileged in the epics like Sita and Draupadi had the opportunity to assert their being without consequences.

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