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Women as Epistemic Authorities in Mahabharata: The Dialogue and Debate in the Shape of Dharma

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Abstract

The *Mahabharata* is one of the two principal epics in Sanskrit literature, offering a profound narrative of ancient Indian culture and civilization. It transcends a mere recounting of the conflict between the Kauravas and Pandavas, providing a comprehensive perspective on moral and ethical issues interwoven with complexities in relationships and duties. While the male characters are predominantly associated with battles and warfare, the female characters play a pivotal role in addressing and challenging the moral and ethical dilemmas within the narrative. The portrayal of women in the epic is intricate, prompting inquiries into the social and philosophical insights of that era. Despite the patriarchal constraints, significant female figures such as Satyawati, Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi, and even Amba, are not depicted as passive or silent observers of the male-dominated exploits. They have articulated objections and asserted their individuality when necessary. These women embody strength, foresight, determination, resilience, and intelligence, enabling them to navigate the complexities of social intrigues and court politics. This research paper closely examines some selected female characters in the epic *Mahabharata* from an epistemic perspective, analysing their role and dialogues in revealing the moral and ethical dimensions of the time. It also seeks to understand how their epistemic contributions shaped the broader understanding of dharma and the role of women within it. By exploring the key female characters and their respective incidents, the paper aims to highlight their dialogues and debates, establishing them as epistemic authorities in the epic *Mahabharata*.

Key Words

Epic, Women, *Mahabharata*, Epistemology, Dialogue, Debate, Dharma, Ethics, Morality

Introduction

The *Mahabharata* is recognized as one of the two principal and longest epics in Sanskrit literature, offering a profound narrative of ancient Indian culture and civilization. This epic not only narrates the conflict and eventual war between the Kauravas and Pandavas but also provides a comprehensive examination of moral and ethical dilemmas, as well as the complex dynamics of relationships and responsibilities. While male characters are predominantly associated with battles and the battlefield, female characters play a pivotal role in asserting their independence by challenging moral and ethical issues. This aspect has been notably observed by Doniger (2009) that the epic "*Mahabharata* is not just a story of men; it is also a story of women who challenge,

negotiate, and redefine their roles within a patriarchal framework” (123). The representation of women in the epic is both intricate and significant, raising inquiries regarding the social and philosophical perspectives of the time. Despite the constraints imposed by a patriarchal society, prominent female figures such as Satyawati, Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi, and even Amba are not portrayed as passive or silent witnesses to the male-dominated endeavours. They articulate their objections and assert their individuality when necessary. These women exemplify strength, foresight, determination, resilience, and intelligence, which enable them to navigate the complexities of social intrigues and court politics. Their roles are integral to the narrative, as they raise important questions about issues, such as dharma (righteousness), thereby rendering them even more central to the story. Narayan (1989) has noted in this regard, “the voices of women in *Mahabharata* serve to complicate the narrative, adding layers of moral complexity that challenge simplistic interpretations of dharma” (134). However the contributions and inquiries of women introduce complexity to the narrative, their dialogues and debates are indispensable for achieving a comprehensive understanding of dharma. Furthermore, they facilitate the understanding of the social, political, gender, and ethical norms of the period, uncovering deeper meanings beneath the surface of duties and responsibilities.

In the epic, Satyawati emerges as a pioneering feminist figure, assertively establishing her own legacy. Draupadi, arguably the most contentious female character in the epic, courageously addresses issues of justice and morality, asserting her struggle and identity as a woman in a male-dominated society. Meanwhile, Kunti and Gandhari exemplify motherhood, navigating the challenges of being mothers and wives, balancing sacrifices and personal desires. These women’s experiences illuminate the complex interplay of gender, duty, dignity, and individuality, encouraging readers to ponder their epistemic roles. Thus, it is undeniable that their presence in the epic transcends merely being counterparts to male characters and extend beyond traditional roles of daughter, wife, and mother. Their understanding of dharma during pivotal moments underscores their status as epistemic figures, a

quality often lacking in their male counterparts.

This research paper examines some selected female characters of the epic *Mahabharata* from an epistemic perspective and analysing their dialogues and debates in unravelling the moral and ethical threads of the era. It seeks to understand how their epistemic contributions shaped the broader understanding of dharma and women’s roles within it. Thus, by examining key female characters and relevant incidents, the paper aims to highlight how their dialogues and debates place them as epistemic authorities in the epic. The paper adopts a feminist epistemology approach to explore their debates, perspectives, and notions of justice and righteousness, which guide their inquiry and insight. Additionally, it seeks to identify an alignment between their words and actions, furthering the understanding of the Indian female knowledge system.

A Cursory Look at the Key Female Characters in *Mahabharata*

The epic *Mahabharata* presents a diverse array of female characters, each assuming major or minor roles depending on the plot and the narrative. Nevertheless, every character is crucial and significant in contributing to the plot’s development. The most notable and essential attribute of these female characters is their focus on challenging patriarchal conceptions of dharma and morality, rather than engaging in self-aggrandizement or verbal abuse. McGrath (2009) points out:

The language of male heroes in the *Mahabharata* entails the use of certain speech acts—like formulaic avowal and boasting—as well as a great range of formally abusive and insulting rhetoric. Women however, in their speech within the epic, are often a source of law and social convention: they are the figures who give judgmental utterance to dharma, a term that is often translated as ‘rule’ or ‘decorum’. It is the women who are the speakers of what *should* be done by the *ksatriyas*. They are *knowers* of dharma—that which is valued as appropriate—and in speech proclaim what *karma* is right at certain moments in the narrative. They are the vocal interpreters of what is worthwhile. (13)

Satyawati, the matriarch of the Kuru dynasty,

is a pivotal figure in the epic, recognized as the first feminist character who governed the dynasty with determination and authority. She assumed control of the Kuru dynasty during the time when it was in dire need of an heir. It was Satyawati who summoned Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa, also known as Ved Vyasa, her son born out of wedlock with Sage Parashar, to engage in *niyoga* (levirate) with Ambika and Ambalika, thereby ensuring the continuation of the Kuru lineage. The lineage of King Shantanu concluded with Bhishma. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to assert that the epic primarily revolves around the descendants of Queen Satyawati, namely the Kauravas and Pandavas, who are her great-grandsons. In the epic, Draupadi, the queen of Indraprastha and wife of the Pandavas, emerges as a significant and dynamic character who propels the narrative forward. Her role becomes particularly crucial during the notorious episode of the dice game. In this infamous episode, Draupadi is subjected to humiliation and objectification, not only by the Kauravas but also by the Pandavas, as Yudhishtira, the eldest Pandava, wagers her without seeking her consent. Despite this degradation, Draupadi maintains her composure and articulates her arguments. The silent response and downcast eyes of those present in the court validate the moral soundness of her arguments. Her action and reaction in such a dire situation demonstrate her strength and resilience. Draupadi challenges the patriarchal norms concerning a woman's identity and dignity thus demanding justice for the wrongs inflicted upon her under the guise of a husband's patriarchal authority. Her incisive questions in the court regarding righteousness and morality effectively challenge the moral fabric of society, positioning Draupadi as an epistemic figure in the discourse on dharma and morality. This interpretation has been explored by Kaur (2018) that, "Draupadi's defiance in the face of humiliation marks her as a pivotal figure in *Mahabharata*, one who embodies the struggle for justice and agency" (102). Furthermore, the role of Draupadi highlights the interconnection between gender and authority. Draupadi adeptly navigated the complexities of being the wife of five brothers while maintaining her agency as both a queen and a woman.

Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, too emerg-

es as a pivotal character in the epic, offering a distinct perspective on the female knowledge system. Despite her unfortunate status as a widow, Kunti wields considerable authority over her sons. Her character is particularly commendable for her wisdom, resilience, and perseverance. She serves as both a guide and an instructor to the Pandavas, particularly in matters concerning duty and dharma. At critical moments in the epic, Kunti's guidance and insights reflect her profound understanding of dharma, as noted by Jha (2012), "Kunti's wisdom and her ability to navigate the complexities of motherhood and duty make her a crucial figure in *Mahabharata*" (56). The character of Kunti challenges the traditional perception of women as passive entities. She plays a pivotal role in shaping the significant incidents and developments within the epic, as well as influencing the progression of the central narrative. Consequently, Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, embodies the complexities of motherhood and sacrifice, as she navigates her responsibilities while contending with her personal desires and the repercussions of her decisions.

Another character of similar nature is Gandhari, the blindfolded queen of Hastinapur and the mother of the Kauravas, who epitomizes the themes of loyalty and tragedy. She remains unwaveringly devoted to her husband and sons, even as she witnesses their downfall. Although Gandhari's character is often overshadowed by the male figures, namely Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana, she demonstrates profound wisdom and understanding of dharma at critical junctures in the epic. She frequently warns Duryodhana of his unjust actions and even reprimands Dhritarashtra for his indulgence in overlooking Duryodhana's transgressions and unjust actions in the pursuit of power and authority. This is noted by Bhattacharya (2015) that, "Gandhari's insights into the moral failings of her sons highlight her role as a critical commentator on the events that unfold" (90). Gandhari's character challenges patriarchal stereotypes that portray women as mere appendages who unconditionally support their male counterparts. While she may appear passive in matters requiring action, she is notably active in critiquing the unjust actions of her son and the unrighteous decisions of her husband.

Women as Epistemic Authorities in *Mahabharata*

The conventional critiques of the epic *Mahabharata* often emphasize the portrayal of women as passive and silent observers of events and actions. However, a more nuanced examination reveals that women have significantly contributed to the shaping of dharma through their insightful words and dialogues. Through their sharp remarks and rejoinders, they have challenged patriarchal notions concerning morals and ethics, embodying the essence of righteousness. This is evident at critical junctures where women have advocated for what is right and just, a stance often absent among their male counterparts. Even in times of crisis, women emerge as torchbearers of dharma and justice. Figures such as Savitri, Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari are depicted as capable of influencing emotions and articulating dharma within the epic. As noted by McGrath:

Draupadi is a steady and highly critical voice in this respect. She is the one to raise the legal question as to the propriety of Yudhishthira's gambling in the *sabha* 'assembly hall'. Kunti offers a model of good kingship at a moment in the *Udyoga parvan* when kingship at Hastinapura is undergoing a major quandary. Amba, through her extraordinary zealotry, is able to punish a wrongdoing in what is a typical form of *ksatriya* courtship procedure. (13)

In the epic, female characters assert their epistemic authority through their foresight and insightful experiences. The concept of epistemic authority suggests that claims made based on knowledge possess credible relevance. A critical and comprehensive analysis of the epic reveals that the female characters possess a profound understanding of dharma, as demonstrated in their arguments. At pivotal moments, they pose incisive and rational questions that challenge and defy the unjust actions of male characters. Their deep knowledge and wisdom of dharma provide insights into a knowledge system that is governed by females. Thus, it is reasonable to assert that the dialogues and debates of female characters highlight the epistemic authority of the women in the epic.

To have a deeper understanding of the epistemic positions adopted by the female charac-

ters, it is essential to revisit the epic and an endeavour be made to comprehend their debates and remarks, which constitute a significant foundation of the female knowledge system. To begin with, Draupadi, the most frequently discussed heroine of the epic, demonstrates her intelligence and patience in the direst circumstances. The questions she poses in the dicing hall establish her as a significant figure in the discourse on dharma and justice. During the notorious disrobing episode, she contested the court, resisting the humiliation inflicted upon her by the Kauravas, and challenged the authorities present there asking sharp questions. The intense exchange of arguments in this episode clearly highlights the conflict between righteousness and unrighteousness. When she was dragged into the court, she immediately posed the question of whom he (Yudhishthira) had lost first: himself or her (II.60.7). The question posed by Draupadi is highly pertinent because if he had already lost himself in the gambling, what right did he possess to wager her? Simultaneously, she profoundly impacted the entire court with her debate on dharma and morality, particularly concerning the integrity and dignity of a woman. She reminds the court that it is exceedingly unchivalrous for a man to subject a woman to such treatment in the assembly (II. 62.9). This aspect of Draupadi underscores her profound understanding of dharma, enabling her to question the moral and ethical integrity of male characters. Correspondingly, Raghavan has noted this observation (2016), "Draupadi's insistence on justice and her refusal to be silenced make her a powerful epistemic authority in the narrative" (89).

Another significant figure in the *Mahabharata* narrative is Savitri. Throughout the episode involving Savitri, her dialogue with the deity Yama demonstrates her profound understanding and clarity regarding the dharma of a wife. Her judicious speech not only succeeded in saving her husband's life but also facilitated the recovery of her father-in-law's confiscated property. Yama, impressed by her acumen and wisdom, bestowed upon her the blessing of a hundred sons and further ensured that her parents would also have sons. Thus, through her knowledge and wisdom, she safeguarded the future of her entire lineage. McGrath aptly comments on the discerning speech of Savitri:

Thus, her succinct and informed speech has won her husband back, and Death is most generous to her; Yama must therefore necessarily return not only the life of Savitri's husband, but he must also extend the lives and fortune of Satyavat's parents and return the sight to his father's eyes as well as give the father a hundred sons. He is also obliged to enable Savitri to bear a hundred sons herself and to live for four hundred years together with her husband. Like so many of the women heroes in the poem, Savitri is not actually human but partakes of supernatural qualities. (108)

Gandhari, the queen of Hastinapura and mother of the Kauravas, also emerges as a significant character in the epic. During times of crisis, she repeatedly admonished her husband, Dhritarashtra, and her son, Duryodhana, urging them to alter their unrighteous paths. Gandhari embodies the theme of silent strength and perseverance, illustrating that silence can also be a manifestation of knowledge and wisdom. Furthermore, her warnings reflect a profound understanding of dharma. She possesses a deep comprehension of the running of an administration. Following the gambling incident, Gandhari reproached and admonished Duryodhana for his malevolent intentions towards his cousins, the Pandavas, cautioning him that he would inevitably lead to the downfall of the clan (II.66.30). She firmly urged her husband to disregard Duryodhana's policy of causing the Pandavas to suffer, as such policies and decisions would ultimately lead to the clan's destruction. She expressed her disdain for those present in the court who humiliated a woman and reminded the Kshatriyas that wisdom should arise from equanimity, from dharma, and from the insight of others (II.66.35). During the Udyoga Parvan, she unequivocally rejected Duryodhana's proposal to imprison Krishna, who was serving as the peace envoy of the Pandavas (V.67.9). Despite Dhritarashtra's actions, Gandhari consistently advised him to make ethical decisions, thereby demonstrating her wisdom and knowledge and establishing her as an epistemic authority. This perspective is also highlighted by Hawley (2005), "the epistemic authority of women in *Mahabharata* is not merely a reflection of their relationships with men but is rooted in their own experiences and moral insights" (45). At the conclusion

of the Kurukshetra war, Gandhari emerges as the sole figure who advocates for all women who suffered the loss of loved ones during the conflict by singing a lament. Overcome by profound pain and grief upon Duryodhana's collapse, she also contemplates the sorrows and sufferings of other women who experienced similar losses. She articulates their mourning and anguish, with Krishna as her immediate audience. This act reflects her profound comprehension of loss and pain as she navigates the moral and ethical ramifications of the catastrophic war. This is aptly highlighted by McGrath:

She portrays the widowed women who are also there, weeping for the bloody corpses of their men, surrounded by scavenging animals, birds, and canines. All this is given in direct visual terms: Gandhari is singing in the same manner that a poet would, being inspired and having access to a world of insight which replicates material and objective reality, particularly that reality which is visible. It is this visual capacity which sets Gandhari apart from all the other women in the poem and which uniquely distinguishes her. No other woman possesses this ability of poetic and dharmic insight: such is the primary field for Gandhari's heroism. (98-99)

In addition to Gandhari, Kunti too emerges as a significant figure who embodies epistemic authority within the epic. In her maternal role, she navigates the complexities of her personal choices and the obligations of motherhood. Following the demise of Pandu and Madri, Kunti assumed full responsibility for the Pandavas, serving both as their guardian and mentor. She regarded it as her dharma to nurture her children and instil in them a sense of righteousness. During pivotal moments, she guided them to make decisions grounded in morality, ethics, and, most importantly, dharma. After the incident at Varnavat, when Kunti and her sons sought refuge in a village plagued by the rakshasa Baka, who periodically consumed Brahmin families, Kunti assumed the role of a mentor and instructed Bhima to confront and slay Baka. When Yudhishthira questioned her decision, she confidently asserted, "The dharmic resolution was intentionally made by me!" (I.150.19) In her interactions with her sons, she emphasized the importance of adher-

ing to a virtuous path and prioritizing the welfare of others over personal gain. This perspective underscores her role as an epistemic authority, serving as a guiding figure for the Pandavas whenever they faced dilemmas between righteousness and unrighteousness.

Conclusion

The epic *Mahabharata* not only explores the intricacies of various situations and relationships but also examines character development through the complex scenarios, often presented as crossroads. It addresses issues of dharma, righteousness, justice, morality, and ethics, as well as the human condition in navigating these concepts. Although female characters do not explicitly participate in warfare, they play a crucial role in offering alternative perspectives on dharma and contribute to shaping the notions of justice and righteousness through their dialogues and debates. Characters such as Draupadi, Savitri, Gandhari, and Kunti are instrumental in highlighting a perspective of dharma that diverges from patriarchal norms. Their significant contributions to the moral discourse challenge the notion that women play a passive role in the narrative, thereby refuting the idea that they are merely appendages to male characters. While women in the epic do not engage in actions such as war or battles, they are active agents in discussions and debates concerning what is right and moral.

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