Mahabharata Through the Eyes of Women

If we look at Mahabharata through the eyes of women, the central issue that stands out is one of their sexuality. Yudhishthira, the newly anointed king after the war, requests Bhishma lying on his bed of arrows, to tell him about the disposition of women who were supposed to be the root of all evil and were regarded as exceedingly frail. This is a strange request from a man trying to learn about statecraft but obviously one that troubles him and which even Bhishma finds at first difficult to answer. So he does not give him a direct reply to begin with but takes recourse to the recounting of discourse between Narada and the celestial courtesan Panchachuda.

Women’s sexuality is seen as a potentially extremely destructive force in front of which the mightiest of men are rendered helpless. Yet, it can be put to great use once it is subordinated and regulated. Hence women are divided into two classes: the utterly destructive because of their unbridled sexuality and the chaste wives and mothers. Within this polarity lie the ambiguities of niyoga or levirate, polyandry and a woman's freedom to take the initiative in approaching a man. All these indicate the changing social structures at different points of time as Mahabharata evolved for about a thousand years before reaching its present form. It also shows variations of region, class and caste. On the one hand it is absolutely legitimate to forcibly abduct a woman for marriage but on the other a woman has the freedom to reject a suitor at her swayamvara in spite of being bound by conditions laid down by her male relatatives as Karna is by Draupadi.

Bhishma explains the division of women into the two categories of chaste and unchaste. At one time he says, women were as virtuous as men and so in the course of natural progress, both began to reach the status of deities. This alarmed the gods who went to Brahma for help as they did not wish to lose their superior position in the hierarchy of creation. Brahma, then created women with the aid of an Atharvan rite and implanted in them the desire for the enjoyment of all kinds of carnal pleasure at the time of their creation itself. Thus those who were created from illusion became sinful while the others remained chaste. Brahma then created Wrath as the companion of Lust and men yielding to the power of both desired women intemperately causing evil.

Bhishma uses a woman, Panchachuda, to denounce women in the strongest possible terms. She describes them to be at the root of all sin. They are, according to her, extremely lascivious and always ready to bestow favors on any man who comes their way even if he is an invalid or an idiot. They cannot be restrained continues Bhishma, even by the Creator himself. He buttresses his arguments by citing Rishi Devasarma’s words to his disciple, Vipula. The Rishi divided women into two classes—those who were virtuous and those were not. The virtuous women were the mothers of the universe and highly blessed. They upheld the earth with all its waters and forests and so needed to be protected and cherished. Those who were not, destroyed the entire race and could not be restrained or protected.

The question then arises, wherein lies the virtuousness of women. The idea of chastity and virtue were conjoined with the subordination and regulation of the sexuality of women by men. This creates a dominant patriarchal structure although some matriarchal customs survive as in the case of Madri where Bhism has to give gifts to her father in return for her hand for Pandu. The patriarchal structure is also hierarchal and these two paradigms operate both in the public and private sphere. In the public sphere the hierarchical structure is seen in the superiority of the two rulings classes—the Brahmans and the Kshatriyas—between whom an equation has to be established so that they do not challenge each other’s hegemony and create conflict. Interestingly, this is done again through the agency of women.

Parshurama, the son of Rishi Jamadagni, angered by the death of his father, set out on a conquest of the world with the aim of exterminating Kshatriyas. When he had annihilated all of them, the Kshatriya women began to approach the Brahmans in order to have offspring from them. These were regarded as virtuous motives and hence no sin accrued to them. Thus the Kshatriya race was revived and the Kshatriyas and Brahmans got related by ties of blood. A division of functionality was established between them so that both the requirements of governance could be fulfilled: rule by sagacity and action through war. These two got intermingled in Drona, a warrior Brahmin who...
avenged his insult by Drupada by ruling over half his kingdom obtained as gurudakshina from Arjuna.

Within the patriarchal framework women acquire chastity not necessarily through fidelity to one man but by allowing their sexuality to be regulated by men whether as wives or daughters. Kunti, for example, the daughter of Shurasena, was given away by him to his dear friend and cousin, Kuntibhoja, who was childless. It was customary in those times for heirless kings to invite Brahmins to their house to seek their favor and blessings for sons. The daughter of the house would serve them looking after all their needs and even share their bed if they so desired in order to please them. Kunti was thus appointed by her adoptive father Kuntibhoja to serve Durvasa Rishi, who pleased by her conduct, bestowed on her a mantra that would enable her to call upon any man or god that she might desire. As curiosity she called upon Surya, who begat Karna on her and whom she abandoned as she was not married at that time8.

The scope of chastity seems to have got progressively narrowed as patriarchy gradually became more and more firmly entrenched. Pandu talks of a time when women were not immured within their houses nor were they dependent on their husbands and relatives. They were free to go wherever and to whomever they wanted and were still considered virtuous because that was the accepted customary usage. However, their freedom was curtailed by Swetaketu, the son of the ascetic Uddalaka. One day a Brahmin came and invited Swetaketu’s mother to go with him in the presence of Uddalaka his father. She readily agreed but Swetaketu did not like it and got angry in spite of his father telling him that there was nothing wrong with it, as that was the sanctioned practice. Swetaketu laid down rules of conduct for women by which they were obliged to adhere to one man and it became sinful for them to deviate from this, as did Dirghatamas in another story. However, Swetaketu also made it imperative upon men to treat a chaste and loving wife well otherwise they would be guilty of sin. Further, he prohibited women from raising offspring from another man at the behest of their husbands9. Thus morality got circumscribed.

In times of greater sexual freedom, women too could approach men on their own and it was imperative upon the men so approached to gratify their wishes. For example, Ganga approached Pratipa, Shantanu’s father in the form of a beautiful woman when she sat on his right thigh. She desired him for a husband she said but Pratipa pointed out that the right thigh was meant for daughters and daughters-in-law so he promised to ensure that she marry his son. Consequently, Shantanu later married Ganga10. Arjuna was punished for not responding to the advances of Urvashi and had to spend his time as a eunuch in the court of Virata surrounded by women11. Hidimba too approached Bhima when the Pandavas were in exile. Bhima hesitated as he was guarding the sleeping Kunti and his brothers. They were, however, aroused because Hidimba’s brother arrived and challenged Bhima to a duel in which Bhima finally defeated him. The commotion woke them all up and Yudhishtihira learning of Hidimba’s wishes gave Bhima permission to go and gratify her. As a result Ghatotkacha was born who rendered great service during the mahabharata war12.

In between complete freedom and complete fidelity to one man lay the system of polyandry. After Arjuna won Draupadi in the swayamvara, the five brothers took her to Kunti who inadvertently said that they should share equally whatever they had brought. She realized her blunder when she saw Draupadi but then the question arose on how to both fulfill Kunti’s words and also ensure the virtue of Draupadi. The problem was referred to Yudhishtihira who was the embodiment of dharma. At first he pronounced with great impartiality that since Arjuna had won Draupadi he should marry her. However, Arjuna could not marry before his elder brothers, Yudhishtihira and Bhima. Finally, however, realizing that Draupadi’s extraordinary beauty had generated desire in all of them including himself and that this could be a cause of discord among them he decided that Draupadi would be their common wife13. Later, after the marriage, Narada advises the Pandavas to work out rules of cohabitation with Draupadi as otherwise it would lead to a conflict14.

Drupada is aghast when Yudhishtihira asked him for his consent to his proposal and says that this was against dharma to which Yudhishtihira shrewdly replied that it was difficult to decide what was dharma and what adharma. It was very subtle and its real implications lay beyond them. Here they simply had to follow the path trodden by their ancestors. Besides their mother also desired this. A discussion on polyandry followed. Yudhishtihira referred to the authority of the Puranas in which the virtuous Jatila had married seven rishis simultaneously. Also, an ascetic’s daughter born of a tree had
united herself with ten brothers all called Prachetas. Moreover, this was expedient because an elder brother could not approach his younger brother's wife but the reverse was acceptable. Therefore Yudhishtihira concluded that Draupadi should agree to his suggestion as the path of dharma.

There is the story of the rishi Utathya and his wife Mamata narrated by Bhishma to Satyavati in this context. Mamata was already pregnant from Utathya and the child had studied the Vedas while in her womb, foreshadowing Abhimanyu’s learning the techniques of the chakravyuh in the womb of Subhadra. Vrihaspati, her husband’s younger brother, approached her. Although Mamata told him of her condition, he could not resist her beauty and united with her. When the child in the womb protested that he had already occupied the space within and that there was no room for another, Vrihaspati cursed him with blindness as he had been interrupted during a pleasure common to all living beings. Hence the child Dirghatamas was born blind. The episode foreshadows the later disabling of Pandu which prevented him from cohabiting with his wives because of his interrupting the mating of deer.

Vyasa also supports Yudhishtihira and narrates two stories to show that Draupadi was in any case destined to marry all the five brothers. They seem to be contradictory but the conclusion arrived at in both cases is the same. According to the first, a beautiful daughter of an ascetic performed penances to propitiate Shiva who appeared before her. In her impatience, she asked him for a husband five times and so Shiva granted her five husbands in her next birth. In the next story Shiva was playing dice with Parvati when he was arrogantly disturbed by Indra who described himself as the lord of the world. As a penalty he was split into five and sent to earth as the five Pandavas. Sri, Indra's consort followed as Draupadi and so although she was to marry the five brothers, they were in essence one. Hence, in one story it is Shiva's boon and in the other his wrath but the conclusion is the same.

Draupadi’s silence on as important an issue as her marriage is strange and out of character. Two explanations can be given. One is that she may have been familiar with the custom of polyandry and may not have had serious reservations about it. The second is that she herself may have been Drupada’s daughter from a woman other than his wife or alternately a product of a levitate relationship. The description of her extraordinary birth as an adult from the sacrificial fire may only be an attempt to gloss over these possibilities. If any of these alternatives are correct her silence is understandable.

It is curious that Kunti should desire that Draupadi marry all the five brothers. When Pandu had wanted her to beget sons for him through levirate relationships she had initially opposed the idea but on his citing ancient authorities in his favor she had ultimately agreed. She informed Pandu of the boon given to her by Durvasa Rishi by which she could summon anyone she liked. She had three sons through Dharmaraja, Vayu and Indra but when Pandu wanted more she said that a woman having relationship with four men was considered an outcaste and one with five a harlot. But then, of course it can be argued that in case of Draupadi it is a marriage and in the other levirate relationships.

Levirate seems to have been an accepted custom. Pandu himself cites several instances. Madayanti, wife of Saudasa, commanded by her husband went to Rishi Vasishtha and got a son called Asmaka by him. The daughter of Saradandayana, a warrior woman begot three sons for her husband from a Brahmin ascetic. In any case Pandu himself was begotten of a levirate relationship between Vyasa and his mother Ambalika. A similar discussion had taken place between Bhishma and Satyavati when he had refused to beget children on the widows of his brother Vichitravirya Ambika and Ambalika because of an earlier vow of celibacy that he had taken for Satyavati herself. He however, suggested that Shantanu's line could be saved by requisitioning the services of some Brahmin ascetic. The Kshatriya race itself, he reminded her had been revived by the union of Kshatriya women with Brahmins after Parshuram’s extermination of them. He also narrated the story of King Vali who asked the blind sage Dhirgatamas to beget sons on his wife Sudeshna. At first she did not go to him looking down on the blind old man. Instead she sent her nurse on whom he begot eleven sons. When Vali realized that they were not his children he once again requests Sudeshna to go to the Rishi and this time he begot five sons on her. This foreshadows Ambika’s substitution of the maid for cohabitation with Vyasa the second time round resulting in the birth of Vidura.
Satyavati confesses to the existence of Vyasa, a great ascetic and her premarital son from Parashar Rishi. He is then chosen by Bhishma to father the children from Vichitravirya’s widows. This foreshadows Kunti’s premarital son Karna from Surya. Pandu mentions twelve kinds of sons admitted by religious institutions of which the first six could be regarded as both kinsmen and heirs while the latter six as only kinsmen. The first six were the son begotten by one’s own self upon one’s wife; the son begotten upon one’s wife by an accomplished person from motives of kindness; the son begotten on one’s wife by a person for pecuniary considerations; the son begotten upon the wife after the husband’s death; the maiden born son; and the son born of an unchaste wife. The latter six were: the son who is given; the son bought for a consideration; the son begotten upon a wife of lower caste; the brother’s son; and the son received from a pregnant bride. This is obviously an effort to provide for the care and legitimacy of children whether born in or out of wedlock. Since the maiden born son could also be the heir to the throne, it can be argued that if Kunti had had the courage like Satyavati to confess about Karna, the carnage of the Mahabharata war need not have taken place at all. Yudhishthira says as much at the end of the war when he comes to know the truth about Karna.

Hence, relationship with a man other than a husband was not precluded for a chaste wife provided it had the acquiescence of the husband and was for the purpose of begetting sons. The position of a chaste wife was of primary importance as no family could come into existence without her. She was vital for bringing forth the much needed sons and for making a home. Her primary duty was dependence upon and obedient service to the husband. Since marriage took place in front of the holy fire, the husband was the wife’s highest deity and her whole being should be devoted to pleasing him.

The duties of a chaste wife are expounded over and over again in Mahabharata. As is the usual technique in the epic, different characters are used to say the same thing in different situations in order to lay down the dharma or the moral principle. Thus Sandili tells Sumana the duties of a chaste wife. Parvati lays down the code of conduct for her at the behest of Mahadeva who assures her that it would become universal law since she formed half the part of his body. The duties of a woman says Uma are created through kinsmen in the rites of marriage. In the presence of the mystical fire, a woman becomes the associate of her husband in the performance of all righteous deeds. This makes her the equal partner of her husband. It is not clear whether a woman has the right to dissociate herself from the unrighteous actions of her husband. The question is not far removed from the issue raised by Draupadi after the game of dice about whom did Yudhishthira lose first, himself or her. It raises the whole question of the status of a wife and the extent of her husband’s rights over her. The question is a tangled one involving two issues: the rights of a master over a slave and the rights of a slave over his wife. It is unanswerable because if Yudhishthira loses his rights over Draupadi by virtue of his slavery then she is left entirely at the mercy of the Kauravas and if he doesn’t he has a right to stake her. By losing her too, however, he has put her in the clutches of the Kauravas. This incident parallels that of Nal and Damayanti.

It is ironical that Draupadi saves the Pandavas in this situation instead of being protected by them. This parallels the episode of the gandharva Angaparna whom Arjuna imprisoned and who was saved by his wife Kumbhinas. Ironically, Yudhishthira at that time had said that it was not worth Arjuna’s while to slay someone who had been saved by his wife and who therefore had no prowess. When Dhritrashtra intervenes because he fears the consequences of the indecency that has taken place and grants Draupadi three boons, she asks nothing for herself. With the first, she asks for Yudhishthira’s freedom and with the second that of the others as she feels that once her husbands are free and armed, the rest can be retrieved. She thus saves the Pandavas from degradation winning even Karna’s admiration. No woman, he says, has done before what Draupadi has accomplished.

But, none other than Draupadi also discourses upon the duties of a wife. After the second game of dice, when the Pandavas are living in exile in the forests, they are visited by Krishna and Satyabhama. Draupadi and Satyabhama meet as long standing friends and Satyabhama half in jest inquires of her how she manages the five Pandavas to make them all so obedient to her and solicitous of her welfare. Was it the practice of some vows, or asceticism, or beauty or the recitation of some mantras that made her in such complete command of them she asks. The suggestion that asceticism or the practice of some vows could lead to such a situation is curious in this context but although Draupadi gently rebukes her by saying that all the practices mentioned by Satyabhama were of wicked
women, the kind of routine that Draupadi has laid for herself speaks of great discipline. She says that she has controlled all vanity, desire and wrath and serves them all together with their wives without jealousy, with great devotion and without any sense of degradation. She never thinks or looks at another man and does all that a chaste wife should. Hence, her husbands have become so obedient to her. Satyabhama apologizes for her levity and Draupadi then proceeds to tell her how to win Krishna’s heart. A wife she says, must be able to convince her husband that she truly loves him and him alone. She should be his confidante not divulging anything that he says to her whether it is meant to be confidential or not. She should keep aloof from anyone who is hostile or deceitful towards him. She should not converse with any man, not even speak to her sons in private. She should also associate only with women who were high born and devoted to their husbands. Finally she should ornament herself and make herself beautiful for him34.

However, all the obligations are not on the wife alone. Some space has been created for a wife’s rights within this framework. When a chaste wife deviates, the fault is of the husband. For example, in the case of Dirghatamas, who acquires a young and beautiful wife, Pradweshi in spite of his blindness because of his great learning. Realizing the legitimacy of the practice of Niyoga, he began to enter into such relationships beyond the limits of propriety. The other Munis were indignant and cast him off. His own wife was dissatisfied with him and told him that she would not be able to support him the way she had been doing. A husband she says was called “bhartri” because he supported a wife and “pati” because he protected her. He had done neither and so she was unable to look after him any longer35.

In the patriarchal framework of Mahabharata then, women gain status as wives and mothers through which relationships their sexuality is regulated but which also gives them a voice that cannot be easily dismissed.. Since sons are of vital importance as a means of gaining worth both in priate and public domains, they are a cause of intense rivalry among women.. For example, Vyasa pleased with the services of Gandhari blesses her with the boon of a hundred sons. She conceives but does not deliver in spite of one year having passed when she hears of the birth of Yudhishthira making him the oldest son in the clan and thus giving him rights to the throne that would eventually give Kunti a higher status than her. Maddened by her grief at this news and impatient of the long gestation period, she strikes violently at her womb delivering a ball of flesh as a consequence. In despair, she is about to throw it away when Vyasa arrives and admonishes her for what she has done. He then asks her to get pots filled with clarified butter while he divides the ball of flesh into a hundred and one parts, each the size of a thumb and puts one in each pot to be opened by Gandhari after two years. A daughter called Duhssala is born from the hundred and first part because Gandhari had also desired a daughter during her pregnancy as there was a special affection for a daughter and son-in-law. Besides the sons of a daughter could access to worlds otherwise unattainable36.

A similar jealousy is seen between Madri and Kunti. Madri, although superior in birth to Kunti, feels inferior because she has no sons. The only way she could have offspring was through Kunti’s help but hesitates to ask her, the two being rivals. On Pandu’s request Kunti gives her the mantra but Madri invokes the two Ashwins simultaneously giving birth to the twins Nakula and Sahdeva. Kunti is infuriated because she perceives that Madri has cheated her and was trying to get more sons than Kunti herself thereby gaining in status. She consequently refuses to give her the invocation the second time in spite of Pandu’s pleading37.

Although women gain status through husbands and sons, they create a remarkable space for themselves within the limits set for them almost subverting the patriarchal order. Kunti, for example, is politically very aware and guards the interests of her sons. She takes them to Hastinapur after Pandu’s death so that they can be trained and educated with the sons of Dhritrashtra and their claim to the kingdom cannot be easily overlooked thus sowing the seeds of discord from childhood itself. She accompanies her sons to Varnavata and later spends a year in the forest with them after their escape from the fire in the Lakshagraha undergoing all the hardships. Later, she unites the five brothers in an inalienable bond by giving them a common wife in Draupadi. Aware of the power that an intelligent woman can exercise if she conducts herself with acumen, she charges Draupadi with the care of her sons. After the game of dice, Kunti is unable to accompany them in their thirteen years of exile but she wisely chooses to stay with Vidura rather than at the palace where she would be more vulnerable to court intrigues.
When Krishna comes on his peace mission he first meets Kunti who laments before him all the miseries that have befallen her right from her childhood when her father gave her away to Kuntibhoja and since when she has never had any peace. However, nothing has hurt her more, she says, than the present separation from her sons whom she has not seen for almost fourteen years. She is very clear that the kingdom has to be won and retained by them. Her message to Yudhishthira is that it is better to die than to live a life of dependence. To Bhima and Arjuna, that the time had come for which Kshatriya women bore sons. If they allowed the opportunity to slip, then although they might be respected now they would be regarded with contempt by the world later. When the hour comes even life must be laid down if required. She reminds Nakula and Sahadeva that all objects of enjoyment must be won by their own prowess. Interestingly, her message to Arjuna is that he must tread the path pointed out to him by Draupadi perhaps because she fears that left to themselves they might settle for a compromise. She tries to arouse Krishna and her sons through him of the unprecedented insult to Draupadi in the Kuru court and is confident that at least Bhima and Arjuna will not forget it. When the peace mission fails, Krishna once again goes to meet Kunti before his departure to the Pandavas. Now her message is chiefly to Yudhishthira as he is the oldest and the future course of action turns mainly on him. She tells Krishna to tell him that his virtue was now declining rapidly because of his inaction. A Kshatriya must depend on the prowess of his arms. She reminds him of the royal sage Muchukunda who was gifted the earth by Vaisravana but who declined to accept it because he desired to enjoy only that sovereignty which was won by his own prowess. A sixth part of the virtue practiced by well protected subjects went to the king, she expounds, while the virtue that he himself practiced conferred godhead on him. However, a king who perpetrated sin through his own actions went to hell. It was necessary for a king to rule wisely but firmly. He could not take recourse to the excuse of the vagaries of time. The kind of yuga that his subjects experienced depended on the king himself because the king’s sins affected the world as much as the world’s affected him. The king himself enjoyed heaven or hell according to the yuga that he allowed to get established. A weak hearted king given to compassion always remained instable and never acquired any merit. She makes an emotional appeal to Yudhishthira that is most likely to move him by saying that what could be a cause for greater grief than that she, his mother should be deprived of friends and be living at the mercy of others.

In this connection Kunti narrates the story of Vidula who was a well educated and brave princess. She rebuked her son Sanjaya who lay prostrate and depressed after being defeated by the king of Sindhus by saying that he could not be her son if he gave way to such despair. He was more of a eunuch than a man if he was unable to carry the burden of his affairs on his own shoulders. She exhorts him to abandon his fears and to stop delighting his foes by grieving over his defeat bereft of all sense of honor. Instead, he ought to think big and not be gratified by small gains. He must range like a hawk ranges the sky and make himself known by his deeds. He must fight in the battlefield and thus free himself from the debt he owed to the duties of the Kshatriya order. If he could not display prowess, what was the meaning of his life. Even when one’s roots are cut off, says Vidula, one should not give way to despair but act mustering up all his strength and courage. Hearing the words of Vidula her son regained his valour and won his kingdom back. Similarly, Yudhishthira should now act as only a man who lives by the prowess of his succeeds in winning fame in this world and a blessed state in the next.

Her message to Arjuna is that at the time of his birth there had been a prophecy that he would vanquish in battle all the assembled Kurus. Aided by Bhima he would conquer the whole earth and his fame would touch the very heavens. With Vasudeva as his ally, he would slay the Kurus and regain his lost paternal share of the kingdom. Endued with great prosperity, he would, with his brothers perform three great sacrifices. To Bhima her message is that the time had come for which a Kshatriya lady brings forth sons. Those who have hostilities to wage never become cheerless and are also never satisfied until they have exterminated their foes. To Draupadi she says that she is greatly blessed, of noble parentage, endued with great fame and that her conduct towards the five Pandavas had indeed been worthy of her. To the sons of Madri, Nakula and Sahadeva , her message is that they must value only enjoyments acquired by their own prowess more than life itself. Draupadi was humiliated in front of their eyes and how could they forgive that insult. Kunti says that it did not grieve her when they were deprived of their kingdom or when they were defeated in the game of dice. What grieved her most was that Draupadi weeping in the midst of the assembly had to hear the cruel and insulting words hurled at her and in spite of being wedded to such powerful protectors found none in her hour of need. She says for Arjuna that he must always follow the path pointed out by Draupadi. Krishna, she
says, knows well that Bhima and Arjuna were capable of defeating the very gods. Was it not an insult to them that their wife Draupadi was dragged into the assembly hall and disrobed. She also exhorts Krishna to make them recall the cruel and harsh words that Duhshasana had said to Bhima in the presence of all Kuru warriors41.

Kunti’s chief aim is to spur her sons to battle. She even swallows her pride and goes to Karna to reveal to him the truth about his birth so that he becomes an ally to her sons. That she thinks would ensure the defeat of the Kauravas. Karna spurns her in the harshest terms possible but promises her that the decisive battle would be between him and Arjuna guaranteeing that she would always remain the mother of five sons. She is forced to be content with this partial gain because it at least ensures the life of her other four sons, Karna being the most feared warrior in the Kaurava camp42.

At the end of the war, Kunti watches the funeral pyres burning on the bank of the Ganges. She cannot contain her grief. Weeping, she discloses to Yudhishthira that the great warrior Karna was actually their older brother, her premarital son from Surya. It is curious why she should make a public acknowledgement of her son now when no tangible good could come out of it any more. Perhaps, she feels, that it is the least she can do after all the injustice her silence has done him. Overwhelmed by grief Yudhishthira performs the last rites of his elder brother. If only Kunti had told him there would have been no war he says as Karna might have been acceptable to both sides. He curses her that henceforth no woman would able to keep anything secret, an action very out of keeping with his generally compassionate and forgiving nature and completely lacking in any understanding of Kunti’s motivations43.

When Yudhishthira is finally crowned king and has ruled for several years, Dhritrashtra and Gandhari prepare to retire to the forest to spend the last years of their lives. They have been treated well by Yudhishthira but Bhima constantly insults and humiliates them. In any case it has become irksome for them to go on living at the mercy of the Pandavas whom they have harmed so much. Kunti, Vidura and Sanjaya decide to accompany them. It creates great consternation among the Pandavas who together with Draupadi try to stop Kunti. She has suffered all her life they say. Why did she have to make them fight if she had to leave it all. Now that finally that the kingdom had been won, it was time for her to enjoy it. But she remains unshaken in her resolve. Yudhishthira reminds her repeatedly that it was she who had spurred them on to fight but Kunti is not to be persuaded. She has no regrets in her life she says. She has lived the life of a queen and enjoyed all the material pleasures of a householder. She has done all she could to ensure that the house of Pandu remained unblemished. She did not want anything for her self. The time had now come to serve the older people, Dhritrashtra and Gandhari, which she had never found the opportunity to do before. All that she had set out to do had been fulfilled and she would now say she will return to the practice of austerities, serve in laws and attain heaven. In the forests she looks after them faithfully and perishes with them in the forest fire, unbending in her resolve at the end as she had always been in her life44.

Just as Kunti plays a pivotal role in the affairs of the war, so does Gandhari. She has been as much a victim of patriarchy as Kunti. She was betrothed to Dhritrashtra without being told of his blindness simply because he came from a much bigger and wealthier kingdom than her father’s and such an alliance might have been politically expedient. When she comes to know about it she binds her own eyes ostensibly so that her husband may not feel inferior to her, but it could also have been in sheer rage at the injustice done to her. By this act she becomes a constant living reminder of it. Dhritrashtra has neither the moral courage as her husband and king nor the sagacity or humility to persuade her to remove it. Her lifelong anger is so intense that her mere glance burns the toe nail of Yudhishthira when he goes to see her after the war45.

Gandhari had tried to dissuade Duryodhana from war. When he rejects Krishna’s appeal for peace and Dhritrashtra feels helpless in front of him, he calls Gandhari to the court as she is wise and the only one who can influence Duryodhana at this juncture. She blames him for following Duryodhana’s counsel in spite of knowing his wickedness. Duryodhana, she says, is completely possessed by lust and wrath and was now a slave to delusion. As a consequence he was incapable of being turned back from his path by Dhritrashtra who was now reaping the fruit of having made over the kingdom to an ignorant fool of wicked soul possessed by avarice and having evil counselors. Why was the king indifferent earlier she asks to the situation between persons related so closely to each other and about
which discussion was about to take place that day. His enemies would laugh, she says, at the conflict in the family. Who was there, she asks, who would use force for a problem that could only be solved by conciliation.46

On being sent for by Gandhari, Duryodhana returns. She tells him that if he makes peace he would earn the blessings of all his elders including her. Nobody, she says, succeeds in acquiring, keeping or enjoying a kingdom by his own desires alone. Only one who has his senses under control can enjoy a kingdom. Lust and wrath are the greatest enemies of a king and it is only by conquering these foes that a king can bring the earth under his subjection. It is easy to win a kingdom but without binding the senses to profit and virtue, no one can retain it. If the senses are restrained, intelligence increases but if they are not controlled, they are like unbroken and furious horses capable of killing an unskillful driver. One who tries to conquer his counselors without conquering his own self and to conquer his foes without conquering his counselors, is soon vanquished and ruined. He who conquers his self as he would his enemy, will conquer his counselors and his enemies. Prosperity worships a person who has conquered his senses and his counselors, who punishes transgressors, who acts after deliberation and is possessed of great wisdom. Lust and wrath are his prime enemies. However, a king who can conquer them together with avarice, boastfulness and pride can rule over the whole earth. A king desirous of gaining wealth and virtue and vanquishing his enemies, should always be engaged in controlling his passions. Influenced by lust or wrath, he that behaves deceitfully towards his own kinsmen or others, can never win many allies. She therefore, advises Duryodhana peace with the Pandavas. When he rejects her advice, Gandhari can only concludes that let victory be his on whose side was righteousness.47

At the end of the war, Dhritrashtra orders that all the ladies including Gandhari and Kunti be brought to the battlefield. It is a world drowned in tears and lamentations as the women tried to identify their husbands, brothers, fathers, sons and other near ones. Kripa tries to console Gandhari by telling her that the Pandavas and the other kings too had suffered the death of their loved ones. Even Draupadi’s sons had all been wiped out. She asks sarcastically for the new king. Yudhishtira together with his brothers comes to her. In all humility he stands before her with his head bowed acknowledging that he has done her irreparable harm and asking her for her forgiveness. She is completely unprepared for this. Afflicted with grief she had at first wants to curse them. Vyasa restrains her and advises her to show forgiveness. He points out that whenever Duryodhana had asked her for her blessings she had never actually blessed him but had always said that let he who had righteousness win. It was only her own words that had been fulfilled. Gandhari recognizes that she should cherish the Pandavas as her own sons but cannot reconcile to the unrighteous way in which Bhima killed Duryodhana whom he could not have otherwise defeated. Bhima himself praises Duryodhana’s valor but points out that he too had acted unrighteously not once but several times including showing his thigh to Draupadi and humiliating her. Hence, he says, it became his duty to avenge the humiliation of Draupadi. He also explains his conduct towards Duhshasana during the war and once again reminds Gandhari of his behavior towards Draupadi in the court after the game of dice. Conceding the validity of her position she comforts the Pandavas in their grief like a mother and weeps with Draupadi as both lament the loss of their sons. However, she has the greatness to acknowledges that it was perhaps through her fault that the entire race had been destroyed. She is referring to the ill omens at the time of Duryodhana’s bith and the prophecy that he would be the cause of the destruction of the Kauravas. She had been advised to destroy him as an individual must be sacrificed far a family, a family for a village, and a village for the integrity and truth of the self. She had not heeded the advice overpowered by her love for her first born. Also, she tacitly acknowledges that somewhere within her there was the temptation and desire to have the status of a queen mother rather than allow Kunti to gain that position.48

While lamenting this vast destruction, Gandhari comes across Krishna and repeatedly points out to him the heroes lying mangled and slain in the battle. She can forgive the Pandavas but not Krishna because he who could have prevented the war remained indifferent to the carnage that would ensue. She curses him by saying that he would be slayer of his own kinsmen thirty-four years later and then perish disgracefully in the wilderness. The women of his race would lament even as these Kuru women were now wailing Krishna unmoved replies that there was no one in the world except himself who could destroy the Vrishnis and that he was trying to bring that about himself. She had only aided him in his task by
uttering the curse. He tells her bluntly that there was no point in her grieving as she herself was the cause of that vast carnage. She had encouraged Duryodhana knowing that he was wicked, envious and exceedingly arrogant. All that she was doing now was try to transfer the guilt to him. In any case by mourning for something that had already occurred a person only increased his own grief. A princess like Gandhari after all bore sons only for war. At this time Dhritrashtra restrains Gandhari and asks Yudhishthira to ensure proper funeral arrangements for all those who had died, the number being one billion six hundred and sixty million and twenty thousand. The person on whom the entire war turns is Draupadi. At the time of her birth itself there had been a prophecy that she would be the cause of the destruction of many Kshatriyas, The war is as much to vindicate her honor as to retrieve the kingdom. Draupadi is an independent woman in the patriarchal world. Exiled after the game of dice when she dwells in the forest but still performs all the duties of a queen fulfilling the laws of hospitality when the ascetics and others come to visit them. giving advice to Yudhishthira and participating in all the deliberations among the Pandavas and with Krishna. She is as much a subject to the intrigues of the Kauravas as her husbands an indication that they consider her a force to reckon with.

For instance, Duryodhana sends Durvasa Rishi, known for his temper, with his ten thousand disciples to the Pandavas. Yudhishthira invites all of them for a meal following the laws of hospitality the onus of which falls on Draupadi. Greatly worried she calls on Krishna her unfailing ally, friend, and soul mate. She had been give a pot by Surya from which unlimited quantities of food could be got but only till it was cleaned and put away. This Draupadi had already done. Krishna arrives and asks her for food. Puzzled, she explains that she has already cleaned up the pot but he insists that she bring it to him. He finds a small grain of rice and a bit of vegetable sticking to it. Consequently, he grants her the boon that the hunger of all the Rishis would be satisfied as there was still food in the pot. Durvasa Rishi and his disciples who had gone to bathe before the meal miraculously find themselves satiated.

Endowed with a fiery beauty, accomplishments and intellect, she is irresistible to men and hence is constantly attacked and humiliated. Jayadratha, passing through the forest on his way to get married sees Draupadi standing alone outside her cottage while the Pandavas had gone for hunting. He is immediately enchanted and carries her off by force in spite of being warned by Dhaumya, the priest of the Pandavas. Meanwhile, Yudhishthira intuitively sensing something wrong persuades his brothers to abandon the hunt and return to their cottage. Dhatreyika, Draupadi’s maid tells them of her kidnapping and urges them to follow the direction taken by Draupadi’s abductors. The Pandavas retrieve Draupadi after defeating Jayadratha. While Yudhishthira returns to the cottage with her, Bhim and Arjuna pursue and catch the fleeing Jayadratha. Bhima would have killed him but is prevented by Arjuna because Yudhishthira would not have permitted it since he was Duhssala’s husband and hence in a way also their brother-in-law.

On another occasion when Krishna visits them in the forest, Draupadi traces the animosity between the Pandavas and the Kauravas right from their childhood. She points out the injustice done to them and to her and asks why was it necessary for her to burn in grief for so many years. She belongs to a great race, has had an extraordinary birth, is the beloved wife of the mighty Pandavas, and the daughter-in-law of the illustrious Pandu; yet she has been seized by her hair in the open court in front of Pandavas and humiliated. Weeping she says that she has no husbands, sons, friends, father or brothers and now not even Krishna as he sits unmoved by her insult. She deserves to be protected by him because of their relationship, his respect for her, their friendship and his lordship over her. Krishna gives her his word that the wives of the Kauravas would weep even as she was weeping then beholding their husbands dead on the ground weltering in blood and covered with arrows. He promises her that she would one day be queen again as he would exert all his powers on behalf of the Pandavas. Arjuna also reassures her and Dhrishtadyumna her brother promises to slay Drona. Shikhandin will kill Bhishma he says, Bhima Duryodhana and Dhananjaya Karna. Draupadi is an active participant in all the deliberations of the Pandavas. Her position on the issue is the same as Kunti’s. One evening, sitting with all of them in the forest she analyses the events with Yudhishthira and blames chiefly Duryodhana, Karna, Shakuni and Duhshasana for them. She tries to exhort Yudhishthira to action contrasting his rightful position as king with his present situation in the forest. Painting a detailed picture of their fallen state she wonders why his wrath doesn’t blaze up at the sight of the misery of his brothers and why is he not moved to anger at her own plight. She had
heard that no Kshatriya was without anger but Yudhishthira seemed to be an exception. However, she points out, a Kshatriya who did not exert himself at the opportune time was disregarded by others as his duty was not to forgive but to slay his foes. Giving him examples of the conduct of others in similar situations, she exhorts to Yudhishthira to immediate war.

Yudhishthira tries to give her another perspective. Anger, he points out, was at the root of all sin and destruction as it obscured all ethics and morals. A wise man forgives and does not allow anger to overtake him or cloud his judgment even when persecuted by his enemy. There could be no peace or prosperity in a world of anger. Hence, a wise man, he says, should follow the path of tolerance, peace, forgiveness and patience.

Draupadi does not agree and regards it as an aberration of Yudhishthira’s mind. Acts, she says, produce consequences that are inevitable. Emancipation from desire is mere folly. Disagreeing with Yudhishthira, she points out, that no man can attain prosperity in this world by the virtues of gentleness, forgiveness, straightforwardness or fear of censure. The proof of it was the calamity that had overtaken Yudhishthira himself in spite of his virtues and his willingness to sacrifice all his wealth, his brothers, his wife and even himself for the sake of his principles. Even in the forest, solitary, haunted by robbers, divested of his kingdom Yudhishthira was clinging on to his virtues. Yet, she taunts him some perversity must have attracted him to the vice of gambling in which he had lost his kingdom, wealth, weapons, brothers and Draupadi herself. It could only be explained she felt by accepting that all men were subject to the will of god, and never to their own wishes. If god ordained everything, and man was not independent even for a moment he could not be the master of his weal or woe. Thus god himself was responsible for all actions and human beings were his mere puppets. If this be true then god seemed to behave viciously and in anger towards human beings as was evident from the distress of Yudhishthira and the prosperity of Duryodhana. God then becomes stained with the sin of every act of man, she argues. It follows that if the sin of the act done does not attach to the doer then the individual must exert his might and act and she could only grieve for those who had no strength or courage.

Yudhishthira tells Draupadi that she speaks like an atheist. He says that he only does his duty and does no worry about the fruits of actions. He performs sacrifices and does charity because it is duty. He acts virtuously not because he wants any reward but because it is his innate nature. A man who sought reward for his virtues was only a trader in virtues and would earn no merit by them. Nor would a man who doubted dharma. He who disregarded it in favor of his own reasoning was a fool because he could only see the external world capable of gratifying his senses and was blind to everything else. For him, says Yudhishthira, only those who had their minds under control and were content with little would reap the fruits of their virtuous acts. Neither the origin nor the consequences of virtuous acts or of transgressions were known to anyone except to those evolved beings who had destroyed all aspirations and lived according to their vows and asceticism, who had burnt all their sins and had acquired minds where peace and holiness dwelt. Therefore, he tells Draupadi, even if she could not see any rewards of virtue she should not doubt dharma or the gods. He advises to do her duties without insolence, firm in the belief that all acts in this world have their consequences and that virtue is eternal.

Draupadi is not convinced. She says that she does not disregard god or dharma but her point is that every conscious creature in the world must act. Lives of living beings were shaped by the acts of former existences and hence they were different from each other. Birds and beasts acted untaught by anyone but life without action was impossible even for them. Man differs from other creatures, she says, as he alone is capable of conscious action. She therefore, urges Yudhishthira to act. One must act she says, both for protecting one’s own self and also for increasing one’s wealth because otherwise it would soon be exhausted. Those who believe in destiny or chance she says are the worst among men and are soon destroyed. Only those who believe in the efficacy of their actions are laudable. God as the ordainer, judging the actions of past lives shapes the present but man working with the aid of his intelligence is free to be the cause of all that he accomplishes. It is because a person is himself the cause of his work that he is applauded or censured for his failure or success which would not be possible if man was not responsible for his actions. Possessions are obtained by man either because of chance or destiny or through exertion. There is no other way. She therefore, urges Yudhishthira to war by saying that a man of action generally meets with success while the idle not only fail but are also overpowered by adversity. At this moment, she points out, misery had overtaken them but could
ibe removed through Yudhishthira’s actions. One can only know the consequences after one acts and so should not be deterred by thinking of the outcome. Even if the act resulted in failure one could be absolved from blame, but if no exertion was made, there could be no success. Success in the world, concludes Draupadi, depends on acting according to time and circumstances57.

When the thirteen year exile is over Yudhishthira sends a peace message to Duryodhana requesting him to give them only five villages with which they would be content. Duryodhana refuses even this but Yudhishthira persists and sends Krishna with a last peace proposal. Draupadi is disturbed and reminds him of all the injustices done by the Kauravas to the Pandavas and that even the offer of accepting only five villages had already been rejected. Duryodhana was obviously not willing to part with anything of the kingdom and as such peace was neither possible nor worth having. The Kauravas now did not deserve any mercy she says. She tells Krishna that if sin is incurred by slaying someone unjustly there was equal sin in not slaying one who deserved to be slain. She reminds him of her great humiliation and ignominy and points out that it was she who had won for the Pandavas their life and liberty with their chariots and weapons only to be exiled again. Morally too, she was the daughter-in-law of both Bhishma and Dhirtrashtra and yet she had been made a slave. How could they all talk of peace she asks. If the Pandavas do settle for peace she says, her aged father with his warlike sons, her own sons and Abhimanyu would fight for her as she would not rest until she saw Duhshasana’s arms splintered into atoms58.

Other women, too, play significant public roles. After the war is over, Yudhishthira as king is persuaded to perform the Ashwamedha yagya. After completing the due ceremonies, Vyasa commands Arjuna to protect the horse and follow it to conquer the entire world while Bhima stay to protect the kingdom and Nakula and Sahdeva to look after the guests. As Arjuna follows the steed, defeating any king that comes his way, a great battle occurs between him and the Saindhavas who still live after the slaughter of their clan in Kurukshetra and who are determined to avenge the killing of their king Jayadratha by Arjuna. Great destruction takes place and the Saindhavas begin to lose when Duhssala their queen, the daughter of Dhirtrashtra and the wife of the slain Jayadratha takes her grandson in her arms and meets Arjuna. The brave prince approaches Arjuna for the safety of all the Saindhava warriors while Duhssala weeping reminds Arjuna that the prince is his grandson as he is the son Suratha, Jayadratha’s son and hence like Parikshit. Suratha, she tells him, died of grief on hearing how his father had been killed by Arjuna and also on being once again confronted by an impending war. Duhssala orders the Saindhavas to cease the battle and seeks Arjuna’s protection appealing for mercy59.

During the same time Arjuna goes to Manipura where his own son from Chitrangada, Vibhruvahana is the ruler. Vibhruvahana comes to greet him with all humility accompanied by Brahmins and treasure. Arjuna, however, does not approve of this and asks his son to fight him as he has come as protector of Yudhishthira’s sacrificial horse and not as his father. Ulupi, the daughter of the snake king, another of Arjuna’s wives and the stepmother of Vibhruvahana, unable to tolerate these words pierces the earth and comes to the battlefield. She asks Vibhruvahana to fight Arjuna in which battle Arjuna is defeated and falls own dead. On hearing of this, Chitrangada, Vibhruvahana’s mother comes there her heart burning with sorrow at the thought of her slain husband. She begs Ulupi to revive Arjuna their common husband which Ulupi does. Arjuna gets up as if from sound sleep and is surprised to see both his wives there. Ulupi tells him about all that has happened and that she had to bring it about for his own good. He had erred in overthrowing Bhishma by using unrighteous means through sheltering behind Shikhandin and would have been cursed by the Vasus to hell with the permission of Ganga herself. Ulupi, learning of this had requested her father’s help who had pleaded with the Vasus. They had then modified their curse to the vanquishing of Arjuna by his own son60. Arjuna also goes to Gandhar and fights the ruler who is Shakuni’s son. His mother is filled with fear and come to meet arjuna with all the aged ministers forbidding her son to fight any more. Peace is established and Arjuna, recollecting Gandhari and also for the sake of Dhirtrasra tells the ruler of Gandhara that he would spare his life because of them but then hostilities between them had to cease61.

Thus, the world of Mahabharata when seen from the point of view of women is one of power structures, both in the private and public spheres, totally controlled by men. They can attain a voice in this world through their status as wives and mothers acting through their husbands and
sons. Independent women are branded as unchaste because their unbridled sexuality can so easily destroy this carefully constructed power structure. As wives and mothers, the sexuality of women is subjugated and regulated to fulfilling the societal demands of producing as many sons as possible. However, women manage to create space for themselves within these limitations and become powerful figures capable of changing the course of events. Hence, they become a force to be reckoned with through their own intelligence, acumen and endeavour. It is more often the men rather than the women who appear at crucial moments to be indecisive, lacking in sagacity and in need of support to move them to action.

MAHABHARATA THROUGH THE EYES OF WOMEN


1. Ibid.
2. Ibid., Section XL, pp.7-8.
3. Ibid., Section XXXVIII, pp.5-6
4. Ibid., Section XL, pp.9-10

For the Nala and Damyanti episode, see LXXIX.
2. Vol.II, Sabha Parva, Section LXX, pp.139-140