

## UNSUNG WOMEN CHARACTERS OF MAHABHARATA: A SAGA OF UNEXPLORED POTENTIAL

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**Abstract-** Composed many thousand years ago, the Mahabharata is a reflection of India's history, geography, politics, theology and philosophy. The role of women in the Mahabharata makes an interesting study providing insight into the strengths and weaknesses of their character. Draupadi-Gandhari-Kunti are the names known to one and all. But apart from these central characters, there are many others without whose contribution Mahabharata would not have been complete. Every person has a story but the successful ones are those which are known to the world. There are songs which go unsung, but still can be heard. This paper is a study of the not so central characters of Mahabharata. And it also an attempt to listen to the saga of these unexplored characters.

**Key Words:** Mahabharata, Women, Unsung, Central, Successful

*Grief is destroyed by knowledge*

- Book of Wives, Mahabharata.

Women are an integral part of every society. Society has its own stereotypes and biases against women from all quarters of life. Women are viewed as fragile and lacking in the qualities that are considered beneficial to be effective leaders. Traditional masculine traits have higher perceived value than the feminine traits in the world then and today. Mahabharata was no different. The struggle of women, identity crisis and establishment of self-respect strongly echoes throughout the epic. Most of the women characters are distinct and indomitable but not well-explored and encouraged in our epics. Among all other women, the rarely explored ones are Satyawati, Amba, Madri, Ulupi, Radha, Hidimba, Uttara, Vidula, Sudeshna, Madhavi, Arundhati and Subhadra.

*You planned to tame a swallow, to hold her*

*In the long summer of your love so that she would forget*

*Not the raw seasons alone, and the homes left behind, but*

*Also her nature, the urge to fly, and the endless Pathways of the sky. . .*

-Kamala Das (The Old Playhouse)

Satyavati, the daughter of the chieftain of fishermen, is our first character. Sage Parasara fell in love with her while ferrying across a river. She bore him a son, Vyasa. He was brought up as an ascetic, but before he returned to forest life, he promised his mother he would come and help her whenever she faced difficulty. Later, emperor Santanu fell in love with her. Her father agreed to the marriage only on condition that her children would inherit the throne. Santanu's older son, the crown prince Bhishma, not only voluntarily relinquished his right but also took the vow that he would never marry so that he could not have any children who might lay claim to the throne in the future. After Santanu passed away, Satyawati's two

sons died young. The older one was unmarried, and the younger had two wives, Ambika and Ambalika. They were both childless. This led to crisis as the throne had no legitimate heir. Bhishma did not relent from his vow because he considered it sacred. At this juncture, Satyawati sent for her son Vyasa. Satyawati said the problem could be solved by his fathering a child through each of the two young widows. Thus Ambalika gave birth to Pandu and Ambika to Dhritarashtra.

Amba, the princess of Kashi, awaits her groom in the Swayambar with her sisters Ambika and Ambalika. Instead of getting married all three sisters are abducted by Bhishma. Bhishma's attack could not be restricted by other kings of the 'Sabha' and Gangaputra carries away the three princess to Hastinapur to get married to Bichitrabirya. On the way, Bhishma encounters an attack by Salvaraj to whom Amba was betrothed. Salvaraj lost the war. When all three sisters were about to get married to Bichitrabirya, Amba decided to return to Salvaraj and confessed the truth. This was accepted by Bhishma with full esteem and she was sent back to her betrothed lover. There again Amba is hindered by her lover and denied. Amba, then, went back to Bhishma and asked him to marry her, which Bhishma denies. There's another version to it where Amba having enough self-respect never went to Bhishma directly but reared up a deep hatred and grudge for him. She started to plot his devastation. She requested her grandfather Srinjay Hotrovam to fight against Bhishma. Hotrovam appealed to his friend Parashuram to teach Bhishma, his student a lesson. Unwillingly Parashuram summoned this Kurushreshth for a war. This war is treated as an exceptional one where a student triumphs over his adept teacher. The Acharya was elated to see the expertise of his student and blessed him from the core of his heart. Amba was left with only the second and protracted way of avenging her revilement, that was her 'Tapasya'. She, then, devoted her rest of the life in 'sadhana.' Later

on rebirth of Amba was possible for her grave 'Tapasya' at Drupad's dwelling as Shikhandi. A woman driven by passion unknown to her and derided by revenge is the only reason for Bhishma's death.

Bhagavana, the king of Jyotispura was the father of Madri. Her mother was originally an *apsara*, who had taken birth as a human after being cursed by God Indra. Madri entered Pandu's life at a time when he had abdicated the throne of Hastinapura in favour of his elder brother, Dhritarastra, and was living with his wife Kunti in the forests surrounding the mountain Satasinga. One day Bhagavana, who had gone to the forest to hunt, ran into Pandu, and decided to give his daughter to him in marriage. Thus Madri became Pandu's second wife. Soon Pandu earned that curse which forced him to live a life of abstinence from lovemaking; he was condemned to die if he had sex. He was greatly worried that he would die without children. The sage Agastya arrived one day. He told Pandu that he had no cause for worry on that count, because the great sage Durvasa had given Kunti a garland of beads and a mantra through which she could invoke anyone she liked and have a child from him. And her chosen person would never deny her because if he did, he would perish. The illustrious Agastya told Kunti that she would have three sons from god Dharma, Pavana, and Indra, and after that she should give the mantra to Madri who would have two sons from Aswini Kumara. After 15 years of celibacy, when Kunti and their sons were away, Pandu ignored the curse on him and became intimate with Madri. This led to Pandu's death. Madri, out of repentance and grief burnt herself alive on her husband's funeral pyre.

Hidimba was the aborigine woman married to Bhima in the Mahabharata. She belongs to the tribe who were termed as '*Rakshas*'. Pandavas escaped from Lakshagriha and reached a dense forest. Tired and exhausted, they all fell asleep at night except Bhima who kept a watch. In the same forest lived Hidimba or Hidimbi along with her brother. Her brother Hidimb smelled the human flesh, who were the pandavas, resting at a distance. He asked his sister Hidimba to lure the well-built Bhima. Hidimba confronted Bhima and instantly fell in love with him. She assumed the form of a very beautiful lady, approached Bhima and expressed her desire to marry him. She also revealed her true identity and her brother's intentions. Initially Bhima refused to accept her as his wife and confronted her demon brother, who was eventually killed. Hidimba begged Kunti to allow Bhima to marry her as she was deeply in love with him. Kunti ordered Bhima to marry Hidimba. Bhima agreed on the condition that he could leave her once she bore a child with him. Hidimba agreed to it. Within a year, Hidimba gave birth to a son named Ghatotkacha. Ghatotkacha went on to become a great warrior who fought with

great valour in the kurukshetra war.

The Naga princess Ulupi got married to Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers. She was the daughter of the Serpent King, Kauravya, who ruled the underwater kingdom of snakes in the river Ganga. It was during the one year exile period that Arjuna met Ulupi, the Naga Princess. Ulupi was impressed by Arjuna and took him to under water world. Here she convinced Arjuna to marry her. A son named Iravan was born to them. Ulupi also gave the boon to Arjuna that all animals of the water will obey him and he will be invincible under the water. Ulupi was an expert warrior and she taught the art of warfare to Babruvahan, Arjuna's son by his another wife, Chitrangada. Uloopi brought back Arjuna to life after he was killed by Babruvahan.

Radha the wife of charioteer Adirath is the foster mother of Karna. The couple did not have any children. They had found Karna in a basket on the Ganges when they were praying together for a child. Both of them took the little Karna home unaware of his whereabouts. Radha's love towards Karna was unconditional. The relation between Radha-Karna is often compared with the relationship of Yashoda-Krishna. Karna is also called *Radheya*, meaning *Radha's son*. It was Guru Dronacharya who gave him the name karna.

In King Virata's palace, the Matsya kingdom, Arjuna disguised himself as a dance teacher and taught Uttara. She was King Virata's daughter and prince Uttara's sister. At the end of the year, the Pandavas revealed their identity. On hearing that, King Virata implored Arjuna to marry Uttara. Arjuna said that he was quite aged, and, moreover, Uttara was his disciple. He suggested that she should marry his son Abhimanyu. King Virata agreed. Subhadra was overwhelmed with happiness that her husband's exile was over and her son was getting married. Uttara became the wife of brave Abhimanyu. Uttara was widowed at a very young age when Abhimanyu was killed in the kurukshetra war. When Abhimanyu died, Uttara tried to burn herself at the pyre of her husband, but Krishna stopped her from doing so, informing her of her carrying Abhimanyu's child in her womb. Legendary Parikshit was Uttara's son.

Queen Vidula was the mother of Sanjay. She sent her son Sanjay to the war-field but unlike any brave warrior he came back nervous and terror-stricken. He turned his back to the enemies and galloped to his capital. When Vidula saw her son in that state she closed the entrance to the fort and severely chastised him. That conversation between the mother and the son has become famous as Vidula-Sanjay-Samvad, wherein Vidula instructs her son as to how a brave warrior should conduct himself on the battlefield. She then orders him to go back to war and return as a victorious hero. As the story goes, Sanjay sailed forth

into the battlefield, displayed exemplary valour and came back to be received by his mother with honour.

Sudeshna was the wife of King Virata. It is in their court that Pandavas spent a year in concealment during their exile. Draupadi as Sairandhri served queen Sudeshna as her maid during their thirteenth year of exile. It was Sudeshna whose brother Kichaka, commander-in-chief of Matsya kingdom, misbehaved with Sairandhri. Sudeshna even after knowing Sairandhri's marriage to a gandharva sends her to Kichaka's house to fetch wine. Sudeshna kept quiet when Sairandhri was asking her to release her from the clutches of Kichaka. Later Kichaka dies under mysterious circumstances. He was actually killed by Bhima. Sudeshna's children were Uttara, Shveta, Satanika and Sankha.

Madhavi, the daughter of King Yayati, was given a boon that after giving birth to a child she would become a virgin again. Galava, a disciple of Vishvamitra, approached her father King Yayati for his help in obtaining special horses for his guru. King Yayati, who was once wealthy, was not able to help, but offered his maiden daughter, Madhavi, instead. Galava took Madhavi to three different kings with the offer that Madhavi would "provide" sons for them in exchange for the needed horses. After Galava had obtained the horses he needed, he then took Madhavi back to her father. King Yayati organized a svayamvara for her at a hermitage near the confluence of the Ganges and Jamuna. There was a gathering there of Snakes, Yakshas, men, birds, and deer, and the denizens of the mountains, trees, and woods. The forest teemed with the princes of diverse people and countries, and it was filled everywhere with Brahma-like seers. But when all the suitors were announced, she passed by all of them and chose the forest as her bridegroom. Madhavi descended from the chariot, bowed to her relatives, then went to the holy forest.

Arundhati is the wife of Sage Vasishtha. She is known for her chastity, piety and single-minded devotion for her husband. She was also very knowledgeable. Later she became a star in the sky known as Arundhati Nakshatra. She was the daughter of Kardama Prajapati and Devahuti. It is mentioned in Mahabharata that there is no one as devout and faithful as Arundhati. It also mentions Arundhati as an ascetic who used to give discourses to even the seven sages. The wife of Agni, Svaha, could therefore assume the form of the wives of the other six seers amongst Saptarshi but not that of Arundhati. It is also narrated in Mahabharata

how once she pleased Shiva when it did not rain for 12 years and the seven seers were suffering without roots and fruits. Her chastity and service to husband is mentioned as unparalleled in the Mahabharata. Arundhati left her physical body on earth while performing Tapas on the banks of holy Saraswati River.

Subhadra was the daughter of Vasudev and his first wife Rohini Devi. Subhadra is known for her marriage to Arjuna. There were two versions of the story. According to the first version of the story, Subhadra was kidnapped by Arjuna. She was going to choose Duryodhana as her husband in Swayamvara, which her brother, Balarama was going to organize. Arjuna was in the midst of self-imposed pilgrimage, and in Raivata mountain he saw Subhadra. Arjuna was smitten by her beauty and wished to marry her. But Krishna feared that she would choose Duryodhana as her husband, if a swayanvara is held. So Krishna advises Arjuna to kidnap Subhadra. Thus, Arjuna abducts Subhadra. But Balarama and other Yadavas were angered by this and decide to pursue Arjuna. But they are dissuaded by Krishna from attacking Arjuna. Finally, Balarama gives consent and conduct the marriage of Subhadra with Arjuna. The second version of the story goes as Subhadra heard about Arjuna and his valiant deeds and began to admire Arjuna secretly. Arjuna during his exile reached Dwaraka and there chance upon Subhadra and the two secretly does a Gandharva Vivaha. Later with the help of Krishna the two leave for Indraprastha and before getting on the chariot Krishna advises Subhadra to be the charioteer which will show her consent to the pursuing Yadavas and hence prevent them from going to war with neither Hastinapur nor Indraprastha. Krishna pacifies Yadavas and Balarama. Subhadra is also known for her son Abhimanyu.

These characters discussed above reflect the social beliefs and culture of ancient India. With the new dawn, women will put down roots of a family, breaking the shackles of feminine symbolism. They are in a path to discover the freedom of sailing in the open oceans taking along with them the shadows of these mythical characters. Far from the cacophony of the past, these unsung characters, will listen to their echoes surpassing the silence of centuries.

*In me she has drowned a young girl,  
and in me an old woman  
Rises toward her day after day,  
like a terrible fish.*

-Sylvia Plath (Mirror)

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