



Indomitable Spirit of Mothers in *The Mahabharatha*

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Mothers in Indian Mythology reveal enormous strength and character displaying extraordinary love and courage in the best and the worst situations. In Indian Mythology, when one talks of epics, usually s/he will praise Sita, Kunti, Yasodha, and Kaushalya as dedicated mothers who are different in their manners and role as mothers. Not only in India, but all cultures throughout the world recognises the ideal of motherhood to be the highest benchmark for a woman. It is the mother who keeps up the life and happiness of the home through her smiles, tender affection, sweet speech and charming personality. As an integral part of Indian culture mothers have been worshipped from time immemorial.

Chaturvedi Badrinath in *The Mahabharatha: An Inquiry in the Human Condition* strengthens the role of mother and her position in the family and the society. He says mother has the exalted status in the life-in-family. Her position is more than any teacher on the earth. "Greater than ten teachers is the preceptor; greater than ten preceptors is the father: and greater than ten fathers is the mother. The mother is greater than even the earth. There is no guru greater than the mother."(360)

Badrinath enriches the various positions of a mother. "Because she bears, she is called dhatri: for giving birth, she is called Janani: amba, because she nourishes the limbs: and virasu because she carried child with courage. In rearing with love and care, she is shushru: the mother is one's own intimate body."(361)

Mother is a multi-dimensional concept that is dealt with extensively in *The Mahabharatha*. Beautiful hymns and verses are composed to praise the divinity of motherhood. The mother's role in raising a child is inordinate. She teaches her child right from her womb. The foetus has a subtle awareness of the outside world. Dirghamas learnt the Vedas in the foetus of his mother Mamata. He argued with his uncle while in the womb.

Foetus Abhimanyu, son of Arjun and Subhadra learnt the way to break the complex battle strategy of chakra vyuha. As the formation of this vyuha was an effective form of defense, the army would be arranged in the form of circular grid. For Shubhadra the topic did not interest her and soon she slept. As a result Abhimanyu knew how to break the grid up to the seventh step, but unfortunately did not know the way out as his mother slept while listening to the story.

There are various instances in the epic where glorious mothers have been instrumental in making strong children. A mother would go to any extent to see her children get the glory due to them. Gandhari a prominent character in the epic, is the daughter of Subala, the king of Gandhara. As a devoted mother, she is regarded as an epitome of virtue and sacrifice. Gandhari, the queen mother protects her hundred sons inspite of their cunningness and the conspiracy against the Pandavas. In Yuganta, Karve rightly points out the love of Gandhari towards her sons as, "When the Pandavas were being sent to a small town on the border, those helpless children came to say farewell. Outwardly I gave them my blessing, but in my heart I was thinking, "Good, now my children's way is clear."(33)

Birth is not always kind to all mothers and may even have to sacrifice their life during the process. Though pregnancy and childbirth is a wholesome feel for a woman, it's a personal tragedy for some. Gandhari delivered a hard piece of flesh after two years

of pregnancy. With the help of rishi Ved Vyasa the lump of flesh was cut into hundred pieces and then placed in the jar. She waited patiently for the jars to be opened and found her sons. The birth of Duryodhan was explained in *The Palace of Illusions* as,

Gandhari's stomach grew large as a giant beehive, but her body refused to go into labour... but luckily a holy man showed up. He cut the ball into a hundred and one pieces, and called for vats of butter, each for one piece. He sealed the pieces in the vats and cautioned that they shouldn't be opened for a year. And that's how Duryodhan and his brothers – and their sister Duhsala – were born. (77)

A mother's main concern is to make a safe world for her child. *The Mahabharata* records many stories of women who give everything to protect their children. During the burning of the Kandava forest, a naga woman swallows her son to protect him from the forest fire. Kunti saves her sons' life from the lac palace. Gandhari stood by the side of her sons in all their deeds, "If they were hurt, my heart would start to pound; if I heard them crying, I used to grieve and get flurried. If I heard that they didn't win the chariot race, I would get dejected." (Yuganta, 32-33) And she adds her feeling towards her children as, "All my life, their moments of happiness were my moments of happiness, their moments of sorrow were mine." (Yuganta 33)

Some fortunate mothers leave an everlasting impression on their children. Some of the children were called as 'son of their mother'. For example: Bhishma as Gangaputra, Krishna as Devaki Putra, Karna as Radheya – after his adopted mother and Arjuna as Partha, after his mother Kunti's another name Prithaa. Good habits, right conduct and formation of good character are created in children in a well regulated home under the personal influence of the mother. Kunti at the time of her sons learning archery and weaponry guarded them over their chastity and saw that they did not employ themselves in overindulgence of sex. In Parva, S.L. Bhyrappa states, "Yet she admonished us repeatedly – 'Never be like the usual member of the lineage, never ran after servant maids, never indulge too much in sex.' She not only admonished us, kept a close vigil on our movements, even at that young age." (168)

As Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex* that the individual's need should be to find pleasure in giving than not finding the weakness of the other, if so it is a curse for marriage. In this situation, it is a deceptive lure to dream of attaining their wish through a child. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* says "According to tradition, it is the child who should assure the wife a concrete autonomy that dispenses her from devoting herself to any other aim. She is not a complete individual as a wife, but as she becomes a mother: the child is her joy and justification. She reaches sexual and social self-realisation through him; it is thus through him that the institution of marriage has meaning and reaches its aim." (536)

So important are mothers that even the gods in the epic have taken their avatars in mother's form. Tough and harsh outside, she is tender and compassionate for her children, lest their behaviour. Ganga, the wife of king Santanu, has taken the form of a woman on earth to expiate the sin of seven Vasus who were cursed by sage Vasishta. Kamala Subramaniam in *The Mahabharata* says, "She said: "Oh my lord, can you not realize that I am going because I must? I am Ganga. I belong to the heavens. Because of a curse I had to live the life of a mortal on this earth..." (4)

Though very less is known about Draupati's motherhood, she is known for her compassion towards other human beings. Krishna recollects the good heartedness of Draupati as seen in Yagnaseni, "Smiling, Krishna said." Panchaali! A thousand pranams to an incomparable embodiment of compassion and forgiveness." (379) Her softer side can be seen when she selflessly fed two orphan kids – Kambu and Jambu while the Pandavas were on exile in the forest. As a mother, she had a compassionate feeling towards her co-wife, Subhadra.

One of the most tragic stories in *The Mahabharata* is the story of Kunti and Karna. As explained by Badrinath, "Yet, in one of its central stories of human tragedy, *The Mahabharata* narrates the story of a mother, Kunti, who had cast away her first born, for he was born while she was still not married and was almost a girl. For fear of the shame ... she floated the child in a basket on the waves of a river." (361)

Kunti's love for Karna is beautifully narrated by Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. She sees Karna for the first time in Hastinapur when Drona had arranged for a tournament to display the talent of his students. Karna entered the hall and asked for permission to take part in the tournament. 'There is a small commotion in the pavilion built for the women of the palace. One of the queens had fainted – perhaps from heat, perhaps from the prolonged tensions.' (83) For the minute of his birth to well after his death, this child was a constant source of dread and sorrow to the mother.

Untiring, undeterred and strong willed, Kunti was by her sons in all ebb and flow of events. On the day of the wedding, Kunti entrusted the care of her sons to Draupati. She felt that she could now live a peaceful life, but as usual, her hope was in vain.

The epic mothers were important to their societies. Over the years, these mothers have lived through the psyche of women of all ages. All these mothers at the end had reaped the triumph but at the cost of the lives of their near and dear ones. The mothers in *The Mahabharata* show that the truth in which one must live is, however, not a simple thing. These women are incarnate in the women of today. At the outset, women characters present a clean assertion of female strength and perseverance, despite the image of victimization.

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