

Gendered Construction of War in Sanskrit Epic, the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract—Sanskrit is often considered to be the language of gods and, therefore, what Sanskrit texts state is taken to be sacrosanct. How was war envisaged in the lengthiest Sanskrit epic of the world? Was it in tune with *dharma* (moral duty) or not? Did all hold an identical and unchanging view of war? That does not seem to be the case. War and violence were understood differently by men and women. This variance is reflected in their language repertoire too. While many men viewed it as a matter of moral duty, self-aggrandizement and resource harnessing, women differed in their perceptions. For some, located in a particular class, it was a prestige booster, while for many others it spelt out doom. The *Mahabharata* is a text that reflects on complex location of upper caste men and women and their dynamic view of war; at the beginning of the epic they support war but end up berating it as loss of life, resources and prestige became evident. But did the text also reflect a change of gender relations in the context of shifting war scenario? It is worth exploring.

Index Terms—Sanskrit, Mahabharata, violence, family feud, diverse perspectives, gender relations.

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian Sanskrit Epic, the *Mahabharata*, is a tale of unbridled violence and its serious consequence on humanity. War is a reality no individual in history could escape from; whether it was active involvement or a distant unfolding, it had a way of pulling up participants, onlookers, even myth-makers and readers towards its frame. The *Mahabharata* is an early Indian text that primarily reflects on the connect between violence, valour and masculinity. However, there were some who were not directly fighting the war but had their fates intricately tied up with it. These were women; wives, daughters and dependents of those who were doing the real aggression. Sometimes their voices were raised in support of war, at other times quietened as the mythographers analyzed larger political gains and losses for humanity. In the following paper we shall try to cull out voices of women who were covertly involved but visibly impacted by the great Bharata war of early India.

II. THE HISTORICAL CONTOUR: TIME, LOCALE AND NARRATIVE

The *Mahabharata* should not be taken as the monolith or a composition of a singular type. The core myth was under production and in circulation as an oral text for at least eight

hundred years (from 4th century BCE to 4th c CE) or perhaps even more. It may have eventually become a brahmanical text with a certain upper class leaning but, in its inception, it seems to have been a part of popular folklore and even through course of its inflation it may have absorbed many local and autochthonous elements.

The nucleus of *Mahabharata* can be traced to a family feud between cousins of the same lineage, Kauravas and Pandavas in the period between 1000 to 500BCE (perhaps in the Indo-Gangetic belt) but its descriptive and didactic details relate to developed societies of early years of Common Era [1]. Gradually the core of the story got inflated and in the process materials from many local traditions got absorbed. What came to be known as the *Mahabharata* (ascribed to Veda Vyasa) originally consisted of only 8800 verse, and the text was called the *Jaya*. Then it was enlarged to 24000 verses, and came to be known as the *Bharata*. Finally, it was inflated to 100000 verses [2], and came to be called *Mahabharata* around fourth century CE. What had begun as a tradition based on folklore, legends, dramatized stories and eulogic songs (called *gathas*, *narasamsis*, *akhyana*) ended as a great *kavya* or a work of artificial poetry. Unlike the Vedas and Dharmasutras (other religious texts) that were conceived for or targeted male audience, the epics cut across class and gender divide to reach out to a wider audience. The result is that extant text reflects societies at different levels of existence. Numerous kinds of voices resonate within the text, some of women, across class and caste. These voices were varied with distinct schema, at times reiterating violence, at other times being reticent about it but in the end all women voices bemoan the tragic impact of the great war.

III. POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

The language of the epic is Sanskrit but in its initial format it must have been in local language; some form of *prakrit* which was eventually replaced by Sanskrit. From the beginning of the Common Era this sacred language, earlier restricted to ritual practice, was reinvented as a code for literary and political expression. The need to compile and translate folk literature into Sanskrit marked two process: testimony of the immense popularity of the text and secondly the transformation of the sacred language now into the language of the elite and growing court culture. By appropriating folk literature that floated around as popular tale, brahmins figured out an excellent means of including the hitherto excluded sections of society; women and shudras from their larger clientele who were gradually gravitating to Buddhism and Jainism. The creation of epics by stitching together the mass of available folk tales, allowed brahmins

Manuscript received February 19, 2019; revised April 25, 2019.

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not only to woo back these groups but also add brahmanical norms that would ensure their social supremacy. Sanskrit, thus, became the vehicle of the social and political domination of the upper castes.

IV. NARRATIVE

The text refers to many conflicts; between gods and demons, men and men but there is one great war that stands at the center of the epic and which had unfolded on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. This is the war between cousins Kauravas and Pandavas and has deep rooted acrimonies going back to childhood. The eventual cause of the war is the refusal of Kaurava prince Duryodhana to give Pandavas their share of the kingdom but also the disrobing of Pandava's collective wife Draupadi in the Assembly Hall, after the eldest Pandava prince, Yudhishthira lost everything in the game of dice. The men who confront each other at Kurukshetra were tied to each other in many ways through kinship, friendship, and teacher- pupil relations and this made the nature of war and unleashing of violence a unique and complex experience.

V. DEFINING VIOLENCE

Before taking up the discussion on women and violence within the *Mahabharata*, it is essential to understand what violence stands for. Broadly it may be defined as power used to overcome resistance. Woven into the fabric of most societies, violence exists in many forms and at multiple levels. Whether physical, verbal, sexual, or psychological, whether inflicted by individuals, groups, institutions, or nations, violence threatens the body in numerous and complex ways. It is clearly related to assertion of authority and demands submission. It may operate in different ways; individual, collective or institutionalized. War is considered to be the highest level of collective violence that involve men and resources at many levels. It is like group violence that possesses its own unique dynamics and is generally more destructive than personal violence and most damaging in impact as it releases the process of de-individualization. In war, not only are soldiers made to feel like cogs in a larger military machine, who 'just follow orders', but enemies are regularly dehumanized through propaganda (and here myth creation) that allows brutal massacres and torture rarely seen in personal peace time forms of violence.

The *Mahabharata* is a story of violence where the message of peace is finally established only after enough blood had been shed. But this unleashing of collective aggressive violence preceded another kind of violence: humiliating the enemy by using women as pawns. Draupadi was put on stake by her husbands in the game of dice and was lost by them to Kauravas. Duhshasan humiliated her by dragging her into court when she was menstruating and she remained violently angry that her husbands did not intervene. It may have eventually ended in Kaurava's inability to disrobe her, but the fact remains that Kauravas sought to boost their ego and manliness by 'acquiring' the property of Pandavas and humiliating them [3].

Celebration of opponent's defeat reiterated the masculinity of not just an individual but of the entire tribe. It may be considered as a form of collective violence. *Riksamhita*, the earliest Indian text, is replete with references of how Indra and his fellow tribes' men celebrated the victory by wining and dining. Kauravas, too, reveled after killing Abhimanyu [Arjuna's son] and the intent was humiliating the Pandavas further. Somewhere, assertion of power was directly proportional to slighting the supposedly emasculated men. Humility was not considered manly at all. At least this comes from the study of early Indian texts though from the time of puranic literature, a subtle difference can be cited. Humility and supplication to god came to be gradually accepted within the broad framework of bhakti or devotion

VI. DIVERSE WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON WAR

A. Support of War

The world revealed by the text is clearly a patriarchal world where war was considered to be a male enterprise. Women did not physically fight wars. There are some exceptions though; Vishpala in the *Riksamhita* and Shikhandi in the *Mahabharata*. But women did participate in other ways by being the instigators/ motivators and even lamenters of wars. Monopolization of violence had been traditionally regarded to be a monopoly of kshatriya caste and we find women of this caste instigating men to fight at times to avenge their humiliation and at other times to uphold the caste virtue.

We have examples of Vidura and Kunti who simultaneously reinforced caste hierarchies and the idea of power-oriented masculinity that had to be proved with the demonstration of kshatriya's valour. Even Gandhari gave a tacit support to the war by indulging her son's Duryodhan's ambitions. Draupadi, too, reminded her husbands to act like men and fight her offenders. The story of Vidura was recounted by Kunti to her sons. Vidura's son, king Samjaya felt dejected after defeat by the king of Sindhu and returned home. Vidura could not tolerate defeat. She insulted his manhood to rouse his valour. 'If the people do not talk of the man's acts as miracles, he is merely another addition to the pile of humanity; he is neither man (*puman*) nor woman (*stri*)'[4]. 'A kshatriya who clings to life without displaying to the highest degree possible his talents by his feat, him they know for a thief'[5]. 'The man who lives grandly by the strength of his arms, obtains fame in this world, and the good goal in the next'[6]. Vidura admonishes her son that, 'the forgiving man, the meek man is neither man, nor woman' [7] and that standing tall, keeping the effort on (*udyama*) (in the battlefield) means 'manhood (*paurasam*)'[8] and 'harden yourself and rise to victory'[9]. Interestingly she also states, 'I have spoken to embolden you, as a strong, man to one weaker to test your mettle prowess and resolve [10]. There was an internalization of a particular brand of masculinity [hegemonic masculinity] not only among men but also among women. It was also a class phenomenon. Vidura acknowledged that in order to motivate him, to inspire him to prove himself on the battle field, she too had to don on the cap of a man, implying that only men went out to fight. She

also appeared to be worried about her son not following the *Kshatriya dharma* (duty of warriors) and that could in turn amount to a loss of face for her too.

Draupadi, too, had told her husbands in the Vanaparva that the need for a man was to act and not remain lazy. 'Generally, Yudhishtira, if a man acts, his attempts work out, while the lazy man nowhere finds things to succeed completely.' Recalling Manu, she reiterated that 'the act has to be done!', for a man who does not try loses out completely' [11]. Her words were a part of Pandavas' reflection on what was required to be done in their exile phase to avenge their humiliation. Clearly Yudhishtira was weak and vacillating, while Draupadi is projected as aggressive and assertive. It's ironic that Yudhishtira disproves his name which meant 'steadfast in war'. It was his wife who was more connected to it and is said to have become the genesis of war and its sustenance. Her very birth is connected with hurtling the kshatriya order towards a catastrophic war [12]. The mythographers of the day surely utilized women voices and characters to reiterate their carefully crafted philosophies of war and violence and linked those to the notions of masculinity and caste preserves.

B. Critique of War

While these may be taken as instances of women initiating war sentiments, we also have instances of the devastating impact on their lives and lamentation that followed. The war may have begun as a conflict over a kingdom, it eventually became a device of total annihilation of the enemy and when the enemy were kin it became scary indeed. During the war Bhima drinks blood of Duhshasana who had attempted to disrobe Draupadi in the assembly when Pandavas lost the match of dice. But Ashvatthama's night massacre of those sleeping in the enemy camp, after the war is more or less over, is most unsettling [13]. Not only does he kill everyone in the camp including all sons of Draupadi, but he also releases a weapon that would destroy the wombs of Pandava women. The goal was complete eradication of enemy's lineage. Its only through Krishna's divine intervention that Parikshit lives to carry the lineage further. Ashvatthama's carnage appears to be an act designed to end all Pandavas and the carriers of the lineage, women in particular.

1) Gandhari's lament

The text describes, very cogently, great pain and agitation amongst women experienced on account of war. There were horrific scenes on both sides of the camps and the dirge comes primarily from women. Their wailing 'shook the worlds' and they were 'like beings on fire' representing end of an age. The extent of the devastation was truly matched by and followed by intense anguish. The consequences would not allow the victors to live happily ever after. Yudhishtira was desolate, in fact he wanted to renounce and was convinced with great difficulty to ascend the throne. But the greatest indictment came from Gandhari, mother of Kauravas. Her lament is recorded in the Striparva[14]. Her authorial role is unusual, something normally reserved for men, but fitting a woman representing torture borne by many of her gender and class. In the chapter lamentations of the warrior's wives and mothers are graphically described by her. Gandhari, voluntarily blindfolded since her marriage, had

been given the divine eye by Vyasa for the occasion and she saw dismembered bodies and wailing women. The absolute pointlessness of war becomes distressingly clear to her. She makes several statements that may be construed as indictment of valorization of violence, one of the most potent ingredients of kshatriya hegemonic masculinity. Some of these are subversive and even sarcastic.

In the verse XI.24.27, looking upon her dead brother Shakuni, Gandhari comments, 'Just as my sons' heavenly worlds were won by the sword, so indeed the heavenly worlds of this evil-minded one were won by sword'. Gandhari in a way mocked at the ideal of kshatriya men that justified the indiscriminate use of violence and ensured a place in heaven even as their deeds led to mass scale massacre. The greatest of the warriors, Bhishma, who had once sacrificed his privileges to preserve the Kuru clan was now eliminated with Kurus (XI.20-25). The futility of weapon- knowledge comes out strongly when Gandhari lamented death of Dronacharya, the great teacher of Pandavas and Kauravas who taught them the art of warfare. Gandhari wailed, 'all his weapons did not save him. He whom the Kurus stood behind when they challenged the Pandavas, this most excellent of those who bear sharp-bladed weapons, Dronacharya, himself was sundered by sharp blades'. 'He, who moved like fire as he burned the enemy army, lies dead upon the earth, like a fire whose flames have been stilled' [XI.23.26-30].

Unaccustomed to the dreadful spectacle of war, Gandhari states how women were stunned as they stumbled over the battlefield, muddied with flesh and blood. The scene described by Gandhari is chilling: 'Staring distractedly, they join a head to the body, failing in their misery to see that its another's and still attempt to join arms and thighs (XI.60.50-52). Wives of the king of Kosala surrounded his body and cried aloud as they pulled out arrows embedded in his limbs. Drona's wife Kripi, 'out of her mind with suffering' sat pitifully near Drona, her hair loose, face downcast. She and others like her were formerly well guarded by their men, but now they stood as orphans (*anath*), without protection and very helpless. The language of the text is of special interest. Words and phrases chosen appear deliberate on the part of story teller to highlight the dreadfulness of war. Hence, Gandhari continuously reconstructs the comfort these women were used to and contrasts it with grotesqueness of the plight post-war. But it is worth noting that her critique is built within a patriarchal frame even as it is sympathetic to women. The pointlessness of violence was linked to loss of personal glory and comfort. She tries to rationalize the cause, impact and hold the guilty responsible.

Gandhari's grouse finally rested against Krishna to whom she recounts her pain and that of countless kshatriya women and whom she blames for not averting the war, despite his prior knowledge and divine ability. Her critique was complete when at the end of her monologue she cursed Krishna and said that, '[he] shall slay his own kinsmen, family and sons and would arrive at his end by an ignominious means' [XI.23.44]. Krishna did answer her and reminded her that her son Duryodhana had grown beyond control because of her indulging him.

2) Kunti's remorse

For Kunti, mother of Pandavas, the war was an occasion to bemoan, even as Pandavs had won. There was a lot of bloodshed. At one point in time she had recalled story of Vidura to motivate her sons to pick up the arms knowing fully well what the end may be like but behaved as a kshatriya woman should in supporting war bound men. But by the end of the war she became a mother lamenting the loss of her first-born, Karna, her illegitimate son who fought with Kauravas and died on the other side of the battlefield. This fanned her personal grief and made her confess to other sons her relation with Karna [15], igniting regret and remorse amongst all Pandavas at not recognizing their eldest brother [16]. But this prompted Yudhishtira to perform funeral rights for his eldest brother and taking wives of Karna under his shelter.

C. Analyzing Critique on War (Yudha) and Grief (Shoka)

How do we analyze a growing critique on war and gender relations within the frame of war and grief? It's not only women lamenting, Yudhishtira also critiqued war in strictest terms. It is in the twelfth chapter, the Shantiparva, that we can actually cite a transition in the notions of Dharma and Masculinity. The Shantiparva is an encapsulation of a reflection on violence; a debate on its defining role in the life of a kshatriya to it being reduced to being a defense mechanism. The early chapters of the *Mahabharata* celebrated violence and valour as essential ingredient of power and caste identity but the futility of war was evident to all by the tenth parva and now was the time to reflect on its validity. In the twelfth parva, the Shantiparva, Yudhishtira was so moved by the sight of continued bloodshed and the loss of dear ones on each side that he was willing to abdicate the throne and become a recluse. He raved about the consequences of the war. He meandered from a general condemnation of the kshatriya ethos to the praise of transcendent goodness of the ascetic and mystic life one can pursue in wilderness. His concluding comments provoked the crisis; 'The heroes are dead. The evil is done. Our kingdom has been laid waste. Having killed them, our rage is gone. Now this grief holds me in check' (*Mahabharata*, XII.7.1-33). Is it possible that the argument against war, presented in the Shantiparva of the *Mahabharata*, was actually a result of growing historical critique of violence? The phenomenon of war was staunchly condemned by Mauryan ruler Ashoka as well as by religious traditions of Buddhism and Jainism that abjured violence of any kind.

Even as the *Mahabharata* stands out for multiple strands of women voices on war, the gender relations between women and men were primarily located within patriarchy and specifically within caste parameters. The images that were constructed were essential to maintain brahmanical (upper caste) social order and to justify upper class control over social productive forces. Women voices especially of kshatriya caste were largely used to augment this brand of kshatriya masculinity, inciting their men to pick up arms on occasions of the latter's dithering. Men had to work towards acquisitions of resources through their monopolization over modes of violence. In that they followed their own caste *dharma* (duty). However, some these aspects of normative

duty were challenged through the course of epic's narration and we have at least two women formerly supporting war, Gandhari and Kunti, now lamenting it openly.

The patriarchal norms of the day did not allow Kunti to accept her first born, Karna, as a legitimate son as she got him before marriage. The *Mahabharata* informs us that her marriage to Pandu did not yield children as Pandu was impotent on accord of a curse. However, the practice of levirate, *niyoga*, allowed her to have three more sons through outside means but with approval of her husband and the sons thus born were regarded legitimate. Her earlier choice-mating remained out of bounds of patriarchy and socially unacceptable. It was only after the death of Karna that Kunti openly accepted him as her son.

For Gandhari the point of dissonance appeared not only at the death of her favourite sons but at the plight of the kshatriya women whom the war had rendered helpless. They were once used to being 'guarded and protected' and were accustomed to social and economic privileges. It was not just the loss of human lives that Gandhari was bemoaning but also the loss of privileges of the kshatriya women. Certainly, these women had no autonomy of their own; the gender relations of the day allowed none. The dependence on the men made the situation of the women deplorable.

In fact, in their grief the two sister's- in-law, separated earlier on the grounds of support to their sons, stood united. The irony was that it was the funeral pyre of their loved ones that joined them in pain and suffering. They burnt with more fire than the *shoka* (grief) from the war.

VII. CONCLUSION

Throughout the *Mahabharata* we get fluctuating views on war, held by both men and women. While the identity of men was surely linked to war as was their notion of duty or *dharma*, women both supported and critiqued violence. The gender relations between men and women of kshatriya caste hinged strongly on their perspective of war. Striparva, the eleventh chapter of the *Mahabharata*, critiques the war, a war that had been carefully crafted in previous chapters. It reveals to us a host of changing social relations; those between men and women and women and women. But it is in the next chapter, Shantiparva, that the transition to a new notion of *dharma* or ethics, the one that discards flagrant use of violence, gets etched out. War was gradually recognized as the last resort to end conflict rather than an identity marker of a social group and that implied a beginning to a new set of gender relations on the issue.

REFERENCES

- [1] E. W. Hopkins, 1986 reprint, *Epic Mythology*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, p. 1 and this he says could be true of Ramayana also.
- [2] The *Mahabharata* verses were reduced to around 75000 in the Critical Edition compiled under the editorship of Sukthankar where the effort has been to reconstruct 'the oldest form of the text which is possible to establish on the basis of the manuscript material available', (Prolegomena to the first volume of the Critical Edition., p.lxxxvi). This edition constitutes the bases of this research.
- [3] Can we also take it as an example of domestic violence? Even as the act happened in the context of an assembly, the Sabha, the fact remains it was violence meted out to the woman of the family. We have many other examples in the ancient texts such as in

Brhadaranyakaupanishad and the Ramayana that did permit violence towards women if they resisted cohabitation or dared to go in for adulterous relationship.

- [4] Mahabharata. Ibid, V.131.20., 'yasya,vrttam na jalpanti manava mahadadbhutam, rasivardhardhanmatram sa naiva stri na punah puman'
- [5] Mahabharata, V.132.2, 'yohi tejo yathasakti na darsayati vikramat kstriyo jivita kanksi sten ityeva tam viduh'
- [6] Mahabharata, V.131.142.
- [7] Mahabharata, V.131.30, 'etavaneva puruso yadamavsi yadakhami kshnavanniramarsaseha naiva stri na punah puman'.
- [8] Mahabharata, V.132.38. 'udyamo hyeva pourusam'
- [9] Mahabharata, V.134.1-7.
- [10] Mahabharata, V.134.1.6.
- [11] Mahabharata, III.33.35.
- [12] The case of Draupadi was a little complex. Even though her character seemed to be used to bolster an aggressive image of kshatriya masculinity, she also provides a counterpoint in the rationale of her birth. She was born of fire and led kshatriyas to their doom. In a sense was responsible for destruction of masculinity of kshatriya caste
- [13] Mahabharata, Shaupatikaparva
- [14] Mahabharata, chapter XI
- [15] Mahabharata, vol. 11, no. 27, pp. 6-11.
- [16] Mahabharata, XI. 27.14-15



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