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# Voices of Resistance and Sacrifice: Feminine Ethical Perspectives in the Mahabharata - Selected Women Characters

**Ariharan S**
Ph.D. Research Scholar
School of Liberal Arts and Humanities
Woxsen University
Hyderabad, Telangana

**ABSTRACT**:

Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Satyavati are four central women of the Mahabharata introduce a distinctly "feminine" voice into the epic's moral universe. Each navigates complex dilemmas of dharma (duty/ethics) through her own experience of power, agency, and sacrifice. (Anggreni et al., 2020). Draupadi's polyandrous marriage and her public humiliation in the royal court spark questions of justice and patriarchal double standards. Kunti's secret motherhood (Karna) and lifelong devotion to her husband's lineage force her to balance maternal love with duty. (Nisha, 2023) Gandhari's unwavering commitment to her blind husband leads her to self-impose blindness, symbolising a unique perspective on righteous conduct amidst profound loss. Gandhari's self-imposed blindness and ultimate curse on Krishna exemplify how grief and loyalty can lead to a moral reckoning. (Parinitha & Lourdusamy, 2022) Satyavati's rise from humble origins, her use of Niyogi to produce heirs, and her political manoeuvring for the dynasty reveal the ethics of ambition and duty (Ethical and Philosophical Parallels of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Hindu Mythology: The Mahabharat, 2024). Collectively, their narratives highlight the nuanced and often conflicting interpretations of dharma, moving beyond rigid codifications to encompass the spontaneous and intuitive grasp of ethical conduct, referred to as "Suksma dharma" (Black, 2022). Together, their narratives transcend conventional heroic ideals, offering a nuanced exploration of dharma from perspectives often marginalised within traditional epic discourse, and thereby enriching the epic's ethical landscape (Balaswamy, 2013) (Dhand, 2004). Drawing on Sanskrit texts and modern scholarship, we argue that these women expand the Mahabharata's moral discourse: they embody an ethic of care and relational justice that complements the epic's formal dharma codes. (Black, 2022) Their stories show that ideals of righteousness must accommodate female agency, suffering, and sacrifice – enriching the epic's vision of dharma beyond the male-dominated paradigm.

**KEYWORDS**: Feminine, Ethics, Mahabharata, Dharma, Women, Parivarta

## INTRODUCTION: WOMEN AND DHARMA IN THE MAHABHARATA

The Mahabharata is often read as a treatise on dharma (duty/righteousness), where heroes debate right action in the context of war and politics. (Sinha & Ali, 2024) Yet the epic's many women also embody and contest dharmic values in their own ways. Scholars note that classical Sanskrit tradition even enumerated a distinct stridharma (women's duty) alongside kingly and household duties, but the Mahabharata itself foregrounds personal conscience and context (svadharma and apad-dharma) over rigid caste-and-gender rules. Sanskrit literary traditions extensively explore emotions, including contempt, which is notably articulated within the Mahabharata, despite not being a formally recognised aesthetic concept (Ram-Prasad, 2023). In this narrative space, female figures articulate ethical dilemmas through care for family, honour, and survival – perspectives often marginalised in male-centred codes. Feminist ethics theorists (e.g., Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings) have argued that women's moral reasoning tends to emphasise relationships and care; similarly, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Satyavati frame dharma around loyalty, compassion, and resistance to injustice, not just abstract duty. (Anggreni et al., 2020)

Our literature review finds that modern scholars increasingly recognise these feminine voices. Saumya Sharma's discourse analysis notes that early translations tended to mute Draupadi into an idealised figure of fate, whereas contemporary authors "humanise Draupadi, lending her agency and critiquing misogyny." (Ram-Prasad, 2023) Likewise, Sandhya Nair observes that the epic depicts Gandhari, Kunti, and others as "ideal women" who "gave their lives to keep Dharma… alive". We build on such studies, surveying both Sanskrit sources and feminist readings, to show how each woman's narrative adds a nuanced layer to the Mahabharata's ethical discourse. Specifically, this paper will analyse how Draupadi's fierce questioning of established norms, Kunti's complex negotiations of maternal identity and duty, Gandhari's profound engagement with grief and justice, and Satyavati's strategic pursuit of lineage and power collectively illuminate a nuanced understanding of dharma that incorporates female experience and agency (Roy, 2020) (Vemsani, 2021) (Ram-Prasad, 2023). Through their individual journeys, these women challenge and expand the traditional, often patriarchal, interpretations of dharma, revealing its inherent complexities and relational facets within the epic narrative (Bora, 2021) (Wijayanti & Rusdiarti, 2019). By examining these narratives, we aim to demonstrate that the Mahabharata's portrayal of dharma is far more multifaceted than a simplistic adherence to prescriptive rules, frequently encompassing the ethical challenges and insights arising from women's lived experiences (Sahgal, 2020) (Black, 2022).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews existing scholarship pertinent to the ethical frameworks and roles of women within the Mahabharata, particularly focusing on how contemporary interpretations, including feminist perspectives and analyses of modern retellings, enhance our understanding of these characters (Parinitha & Lourdusamy, 2022). For instance, Kavita Kane's reinterpretations of mythical figures like Karna's wife, Uruvi, and Satyavati highlight issues of gender, caste, and individuality, demonstrating a modern re-engagement with marginalised female narratives from the Mahabharata (Rathod, 2022). Additionally, the burgeoning field of graphic novels and comics offers a unique medium for examining gender dynamics and power structures within the epic, often recontextualizing historical narratives through a contemporary

feminist lens, as seen in works that revisit Draupadi's experiences (Lodhia, 2020). Draupadi is a pivotal figure whose public disrobing in the court of the Kauravas, specifically, prompts profound questions about justice, divine intervention, and the societal indifference to suffering (Sharma, 2020).

Kunti's character, marked by her secret motherhood and the dilemmas of maternal sacrifice and duty, provides another lens through which to explore the complexities of dharma and social expectations (Bharathi & Manjula, 2021). Satyavathi's strategic maneuvering and her pragmatic approach to dynastic succession further illustrate the intricate interplay between personal ambition and societal duty within the epic's ethical landscape (Bharathi & Manjula, 2021). Gandhari's unwavering commitment to her husband and her moral stance against injustice, despite her self-imposed blindness, foregrounds the nuanced ethical considerations of devotion and protest within a patriarchal framework (Jena & Samantray, 2021). Furthermore, the epic's portrayal of female characters often challenges the notion of universal moral principles, introducing a dynamic understanding of dharma that accommodates individual circumstances and relational ethics (Killingley, 1991).

## DRAUPADI: POLYANDRY, HUMILIATION, AND JUSTICE

Draupadi – princess of Panchala and wife to the five Pandava brothers – is arguably the epic's most outspoken female character. Her very birth is prophesied for righteous vengeance: a divine voice declares that she is born "to uproot the Kauravas and establish the rule of religion". In practice, Draupadi repeatedly challenges patriarchal authority and injustice. In the game of dice (Sabha Parva), she famously questions Yudhishthira's right to stake her when he himself had just been defeated: "Draupadi repeatedly questioned the right of Yudhishthira to place her at stake when he himself had lost his freedom… No one could give her an answer." (Ethical and Philosophical Parallels of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the Hindu Mythology The Mahabharat, 2024)

When Duryodhana orders Dusana to strip Draupadi, she prays publicly to Krishna, implicitly invoking divine justice to spare her dignity. This scene – her anguished plea and miraculous rescue – is the climax of her humiliation and resistance. Rather than passively accept fate, Draupadi refuses silence: she demands accountability from the court's elders and vows retribution. According to one scholarly reading, this outcry "subverts the idea of the woman's body being the site on which male hegemonic structures operate", (Pathak, 2019) as Draupadi defies the notion that her honour depends solely on an unviolated body. Instead, her active resistance and invocation of divine justice transform her disrobing into a pivotal moment that galvanises the Pandavas and leads to the great war (Verma, 2015).

Modern analysts often cast Draupadi as a proto-feminist figure. Preeti Chaudhary, for instance, describes Draupadi as "not a human… a superhuman, worshipped as a cult goddess," noting her "proud and angry" will and resilience. In fact, one author calls her "the shining jewel" of the epic. Saumya Sharma observes that while older accounts emphasise destiny and patriarchal norms, newer portrayals allow Draupadi to "express emotions, opinions, and judgements of her own", critiquing misogyny. After the dice episode, Draupadi's vows (e.g., swearing by Krishna never to tie her hair again until Duhṣaṇa's death) and her demands ("Shame on the hand that touched my hair!") highlight a morality grounded in personal honour and cosmic justice. In sum, Draupadi's story problematises conventional dharma: her fierce defense of her

own agency and of dharma itself forces the epic's heroes to reckon with a woman's right to justice, not just as a passive object of male will but as an active moral agent. (Bhattacharya, 2006)

## KUNTI: SECRET MOTHERHOOD AND MATERNAL DUTY

Kunti, wife of King Pandu and mother of the Pandavas (except the twins), exemplifies the devoted but conflicted wife-mother (pativrata) archetype. From youth she is blessed with a mantra to summon deities and bear children, which she uses first to invoke Surya and bear Karna out of wedlock; her shock and shame at this secret mark the first sacrifice for social dharma in her life. Subsequently, she uses this boon, at Pandu's request, to bear Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhima, and Arjuna, establishing the Pandava lineage and fulfilling her marital duty (Parinitha & Lourdusamy, 2022). This early life event establishes a pattern of Kunti's agency being inextricably linked to her reproductive capabilities, underscoring the societal value placed on progeny and lineage within the epic's context.

Later, after marrying Pandu, Kunti dutifully invokes the gods (Dharmaraja, Vayu, and, Indra) to produce Yudhishthira, Bhima, and Arjuna as Pandu requests, and even shares the mantra with Pandu's second wife, Madri, for the twins. The Mahabharata praises Kunti's character: one commentator calls her "the embodiment of patience, fortitude and self-sacrifice",(Vemsani, 2021) noting that she raised the Pandavas "by abandoning all personal enjoyment" and imparted to them "the eternal philosophy of dharma" through her own life. Her entire existence is portrayed as "dedicated to the fulfillment of dharma", both as Pandu's obedient queen and as a devoted mother. Yet Kunti's narrative also entails painful moral trade-offs. When the Pandavas unwittingly share Draupadi as their common wife, it is Kunti's offhand words ("share whatever you have acquired") that, in interpretation, bind Draupadi to all five brothers – an act some modern interpreters critique as coldly calculating. Kunti suffers tremendous loss when Pandu dies and Madri self-immolates; she then single-handedly cares for five children in exile. Before the Kurukshetra war, Kunti reveals to Karna that she is his mother. She pleads with him to spare her sons, but he refuses; only after the war's end does she tell the Pandavas the truth about Karna's birth. These choices reflect Kunti's constant dilemma between maternal love and dynastic dharma. (Vemsani, 2021)

As Nair observes, "No other mother had as immense love and affection towards her children as Kunti," yet "at the very same time, she held her dharma firmly." In practice, her duty to safeguard the family line (for example, urging Karna to keep faith with the kingdom) outweighs individual compassion. In the end, Kunti retires to the forest with the elders, embodying the epic's ideal of selfless elderhood. Kunti thus illustrates a maternal ethic: her suffering and sacrifices fulfill her role as matriarch and teacher of dharma, even as they entail personal agony. Her example shows that feminine duty can require stoicism and concealment – a contrast to her daughter-in-law Draupadi's public defiance, yet another voice in the epic's moral conversation. (Dhand, 2004)

## GANDHARI: BLINDFOLDED DEVOTION AND CURSING FATE

Gandhari, wife of blind King Dhritarashtra, epitomises loyalty through self-denial. Upon marriage she chooses to share her husband's blindness:"Voluntarily wrapped her eyes…with a cloth, to spend her life blindfolded." (LIMERENCE AND LUST AS ANANKE IN THE MAHABHARATA, 2018) This extreme devotion is interpreted as her own form of dharma – a sacrificial allegiance to her husband and the Kuru line. Scholars praise her righteousness: one analysis calls her "one of the noblest women characters," who "stood on principles of Dharma firmly" even at personal cost. Indeed, Gandhari consistently upholds virtue: she famously chastises Dhritarashtra for tolerating Duryodhana's tyranny (telling him, "Where there is Righteousness, there is Victory"), and she exhorts her sons to accept Krishna's counsel in the war for the sake of cosmic order.

Paradoxically, Gandhari's grief and frustration later turn into a powerful moral condemnation. After witnessing the slaughter of her hundred sons in the war, she blames Krishna – a divine friend – for allowing such bloodshed. With her final strength, she "passionately cursed" Krishna for the death of warrior-heroes. The Mahabharata describes her last words as a prophecy: she foretells Krishna's own downfall, saying indirectly that his lineage will be destroyed. Krishna, accepting the inevitability of fate, acknowledges that Gandhari's words "shall be fulfilled" – the Yadava clan is fated to destroy itself. In other words, Gandhari stakes moral accountability even for the divine. Her curse exemplifies a feminine ethical claim: a mother's rage and sense of justice transcends family boundaries, holding even gods to account for human suffering. (Dhand, 2004) Gandhari's life thus dramatises the interplay of devotion and revolt. She sacrifices her own sight for her husband, yet she refuses to blind herself morally. In Nair's words, Gandhari "denied the fortunes of her own sons…and all other personal interests for the sake of Dharma", choosing dharma over dynastic security. And when dharma (her moral order) is violated, she does not submit silently. Her final curse is both a product of maternal grief and a stark demand that dharma itself must answer for this injustice. Gandhari's arc shows how feminine loyalty can demand both self-sacrifice and fierce moral judgement, expanding the epic's understanding of ethical action. (Jena & Samantray, 2021) Beyond these pivotal female figures, the Mahabharata features a multitude of other women who contribute to its intricate ethical tapestry, often challenging or reinforcing the patriarchal norms of their era (Vemsani, 2021).

## SATYAVATI: AMBITION, NIYOGA, AND DYNASTIC DUTY

Satyavati's story begins in obscurity – born to a fisher family – and ends with her shaping the Kuru succession. Her ambition to secure the throne drives several unprecedented acts that probe the boundaries of dharma. Initially, she catches the eye of King Santanu, and their union leads Santanu to renounce the throne (making Bhisma vow celibacy so Satyavati can marry him). But Satyavati's defining interventions come later. When her step-sons (Śāntanu's heirs) die childless, she revives the ancient custom of niyoga (levirate-like conception). Bhisma, bound by his vow, refuses to impregnate the widows. Undeterred, *"Satyavati took a fateful decision: she recalled her son, Ved Vyasa… to save her lineage."* Vyasa, born years before to Satyavati and a sage, fathers Dhritarashtra and Pandu as requested. (Padhy, 2016)

This act of niyoga is portrayed ambivalently. On one hand, ancient dharma-smritis allow such practices for household continuity, and the Mahabharata even calls niyoga "a morally ideal standard" in crisis. It saved Hastinapura from extinction and upheld Satyavati's duty to the dynasty. (Sahgal, 2012) On the other hand, Satyavati's pragmatism has ironic consequences: as the narrative itself notes, Dhritarashtra and Pandu "had no Kuru genes… No blood came to them from [Santanu]… End of the Kuru line!" By insisting on her own son as progenitor, she guarantees a rightful heir but unknowingly ends the original royal bloodline. This twist has been interpreted as Satyavati's personal revenge – she was once rejected by Kshatriyas, and now it is their lineage that ends without their blood. This intricate narrative nuance underscores Mahabharata's exploration of complex ethical dilemmas and the subtle (Suksma) nature of dharma, where actions undertaken with virtuous intentions can yield unforeseen and paradoxical outcomes (Black, 2022). Modern commentaries note Satyavati's boldness. One contemporary writer even quotes her rhetorical questioning of traditional motherhood: "Why is motherhood so overrated… If the child is not conceived with love and joy, why burden us with the 'joy of motherhood?" (Chaudhary & Bhargava, 2006) Satyavati bluntly rebukes Bhisma for his vow that left the kingdom heirless, calling it a "selfish" rigidity that valued vows over the living child. In doing so, she challenges patriarchal ideals: she values effective parenthood and political necessity over sanctimonious ritual. However, her means – using a son born out of wedlock, orchestrating surrogacy – also confront strict dharmic norms, raising the question of whether expedience can violate honour.

The Mahabharata does not completely condemn Satyavati: it shows her intentions as dynastic duty and her sadness at Śāntanu's loss. But her story remains ethically complex: she achieves power and continuity for the Kuru line, yet at the cost of bending social conventions. In Satyavati we see another facet of feminine ethics – pragmatic, ambitious, but driven by loyalty to family survival. (Bhattacharya, 2006) Beyond Satyavati, the epic introduces Kunti, whose experiences with divine conceptions and the challenges of single motherhood further illuminate the multifaceted roles women played in shaping the epic's unfolding narrative and ethical landscape. Kunti's narrative arc, particularly her utilisation of a divine boon for progeny, offers a unique perspective on procreative autonomy within a highly structured societal framework (Kalra et al., 2016). This aspect of her story resonates with modern discussions surrounding reproductive endocrinology and the administration of oral agents for inducing ovulation, drawing parallels between ancient narratives and contemporary gynecological practices (Kalra et al., 2016).

## CONCLUSION: TOWARD A FEMININE ETHICS OF DHARMA

Across these narratives, the Mahabharata's women introduce a feminine ethical discourse that both upholds and critiques conventional dharma. Draupadi demands justice for personal honour; Kunti sacrifices self-interest for maternal duty; Gandhari merges devotion with moral outrage; Satyavati subordinates female modesty to dynastic necessity. They illustrate that dharma in the epic is not monolithic. In particular: (Dhand, 2004) They emphasise relational ethics. Draupadi and Gandhari appeal to Krishna as a protector of the helpless. Kunti's dharma is rooted in care for her sons and fidelity to her husband's line. Satyavati prioritises lineage survival, a familial duty. In each case, care for others guides their choices. This resonates with feminist ethicists like Gilligan and Noddings, who argue that women's morality often centers on

relationships and caretaking. They challenge patriarchal assumptions. Draupadi refuses to be passive property; Kunti navigates rituals around secrecy and honor; Gandhari spurns her sons' immediate benefit to honor higher justice; Satyavati questions ceremonial motherhood in service of real heirs. These women repeatedly subvert male-centered norms, showing that dharma must accommodate mercy, compassion, and the real stakes of women's lives. (Motswapong, 2017) They endure and transform suffering. Each woman sacrifices something vital – sight, comfort, family, social standing – yet uses that sacrifice as a moral statement. Gandhari's blindness becomes symbolic witness; Kunti's sorrow teaches humility; Draupadi's pain fuels calls for adbhuta (miraculous justice); Satyavati's ambition forces new traditions. In their suffering, they insist on being heard.

Literature on the Mahabharata increasingly highlights such dimensions. Scholars like Pulane and Chaudhary celebrate Draupadi's assertiveness as "gendered resistance". Commentators on Gandhari note how her curse enforces moral consequence on divine will. And feminist writers point out that women characters like Kunti and Satyavati reveal an ethical care that complements the warriors' dharma. As one modern analysis observes, the epic sees Kunti and Gandhari as heroes of patience and sacrifice – "ideal women who gave their lives to keep Dharma … which regulated the entire universe". In conclusion, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Satyavati each complicate the Mahabharata's moral vision. Their stories insist that righteousness (dharma) must be flexible enough to include female voices of agency, suffering, and devotion. The epic thus becomes richer: it teaches not only the duties of kings and warriors but also how ordinary and extraordinary women interpret justice and duty in a troubled world. By listening to their ethical discourse, we see that Mahabharata's sense of right action is as much about human relationships and empathy as about rule-bound law – a realisation with profound implications for dharma itself. Furthermore, the epic's nuanced portrayal of female agency challenges monolithic interpretations of dharma, suggesting a more expansive and adaptable ethical framework.

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