

Revisiting Mahabharata through Hermeneutical Prism

Shiwangi Shailja and Manoj Kumar

Introduction

Mahabharata is a complex composition spread over several layers across varied periods, and its core elements are extracted from distinct parts of the ancient Indian land. It is not one story but many stories overlapping and running into each other. It has grown in stages across many historic conventions. Like the Indian jungle, it unfolds itself in a vast wilderness of trees entwined with creepers and colourful flowers of mystifying categories, inhabited by numerous as well as an astonishing variety of creatures, birds, and beasts. It is a wonder piled upon wonders. There are several contradictions and criticisms flocked together for this grand Epic. A candid and unbiased glance at the phenomena around us gives us a specific picture and perspective. A new vision and perspective emerge when we discern the same through a prism of investigation. The hermeneutical approach articulates the understanding of a text by placing it in the frame of reference of its times and the society in which it was located and also appreciating the cultural, social, and political forces that might have influenced its outlook. The epic Mahabharata is full of players and situations that mesmerise readers. The plot is embedded with kings, ministers, commanders, courtesans, mentors, soldiers, etc. Birth, lineage, and warfare techniques have a role to play in deciding one's status in that setting. Many characters in Mahabharata are seen, judged, and criticised vehemently for their actions in the ancient era. One such character is Madhavi, daughter of King Yayati, whose story appears in the Udyog Parva of Mahabharata. The report raises many uncomfortable questions about the status and conduct towards women in a society of a bygone era, which was guided by its own set of

values, rules and laws. The fascinating yet disturbing episode has been studied in-depth by scholars, feminists, and dramatists using social, psychological, and Post-Modern lenses.

The Story

Galava, a devoted pupil of sage Vishwamitra, stayed and served his teacher with utmost loyalty and sincerity, even under challenging circumstances. At the end of the academic year, pleased with Galava, Vishwamitra blessed him and let him go; still, Galava insisted on stating the Gurudakshina, paid as a token of gratitude in return for the knowledge gained so far. Finally, Guru Vishwamitra asked Galava to present him eight hundred white seeds of good pedigree horses as white as the rays of the radiant moon, and every horse must have a black ear.

*Ektaha shamkarna hayana chandravarchasam,
Ashto shatani me dehi gaccha Galav ma Chiram- (27)*

Galava set out on a journey in quest of such rare types of horses but could not find any. While Galava was brooding in desperation, Suparna, his friend, helped Galava by taking him to many kings who might possess such rare species of horses. At first, the duo reached the court of Yayati, King of Prasthana, with their ask of eight hundred such horses. King Yayati, whose wealth was depleted, had no horses having such specifications. Nevertheless, the King would never return a mendicant empty-handed in that era. Therefore, Yayati gifted, instead, his beautiful daughter Madhavi and suggested that by setting her a price, they could get hold of the horses of their required specifications. Yayati added that her daughter could promote every virtue, and any king would gladly pay any price to be with her, even for a short time.

*asyâh œalkam pradâsyanti nrpâ râjyam api dhruvam
kim punah œyâmakarnânâm hayânâm dve catuhœate – (13)*

Galava and Madhvi first met the King of Ayodhya, Haryasva, renowned for his valour, wealth, and a large army. Galava offered Madhavi for marriage to the childless King Haryasva in exchange for eight hundred purebred lunar white horses, each one having one black ear in hue. The

King was awestruck by the beauty of Madhavi, but he only had two hundred horses of such specifications. So, King Haryasva made a counter-deal of giving the entire two hundred horses of the desired stipulation to Galava instead of a son with Madhavi. The proposed offer was awkward, but Madhavi intervened and told Galava that a sage blessed her with the exceptional faculty of regaining her virginity each time after childbirth. Madhavi suggested Galava accept the offer, and after the birth, he could take her to the next King and another until a total of eight hundred horses was collected.

*mama datto varah kaœcit kena cid brahmavâdinâ
 prasûtyante prasûtyante kanyaiva tvam bhavicyasi
 sa tvam dadasva mâm râjñe pratigrhya hayottamân
 nrpebhyo hi caturbhyas te pûrnâny astau œtâni vai
 bhavicyanti tathâ putrâ mama catvâra eva ca
 kriyatâm mama samhâro gurvartham dvija sattama (114)*

The idea seemed to be workable management; hence, Galava agreed to this counter-offer. In due course of time, Haryasva had a son by Madhavi, who was named Vasumanasa. The newborn grew up to be a splendid king, the wealthiest and greatest benefactor among all the contemporary kings.

Galava took Madhavi to the next King, Divodas, King of Kashi, famous for his valour and wealth. Divodas being well aware of Madhavi's story and beauty, gladly agreed to give two hundred horses of prerequisite qualifications that he had. Madhavi lived with Divodasa until a son was born to her. He was named Pratardana, who later became a worthy heir to the throne of Kashi. Having regained her virginity again, Madhavi left her son with his father and returned to Galava. The next King was Ushinara of Bhojanagari, who had only two hundred horses. He handed them over to Galava and resided with Madhavi till a son named Sibi was born. Sibi later got renowned as the upholder of truth and justice. Madhavi became a virgin once again. Until then, Galava collected six hundred horses of such unusual features and needed two hundred more to fulfil his commitment. Suparna informs Galava that there were no more such horses other than those already collected from different

kings. On the suggestion of Suparna, Galava submits six hundred horses to his teacher Vishwamitra and requests to accept Madhavi in lieu of the remaining two hundred horses and absolve him of Guru Dakshina. Vishwamita accepted the proposal and discharged Galava of his obligations.

*viṣvâmitras tu tam drstvâ gâlavam saha paksinâ
kanyâm ca tâm varârohâm idam ity abravîd vacah
kim iyam pûrvam eveha na dattâ mama gâlava (117)*

Madhavi bore to Vishwamita a son named Ashtaka. Ashtaka, later favourably known as the King, performed Ashva-medha yajnas. Galava thanked Madhavi, Yayati, and all the three Kings who extended their support and helped Galava be freed from his debt. He was grateful to Madhavi for her selfless support and for bearing three magnificent heirs for three childless kings. Taking leave from his Guru, Galava retired to the forest.

*jâto dânapatih putras tvayâ ûûras tathâparah
satyadharmarataû cânyo yajvâ câpi tathâparah
tad âgaccha varârohe târitas te pitâ sutaih
catvâraû caiva râjânas tathâham ca sumadhyame (117)*

After some time, Visvamitra retreated to the forest and handed over the six hundred horses to his son Ashtaka. He also sent Madhavi back to her father, Yayati. Yayati tried to arrange her daughter's wedding, as many suitors, including the three kings who had sons from Madhavi, were eager to marry her. However, Madhavi refused all the offers as she was no more interested in marriage or childbearing. Madhavi retired to the forest and lived a peaceful life of a hermit.

Looking Through Hermeneutical Lenses

The story of Madhavi surfaces in Mahabharata, but it belongs to the Pre-Mahabharata period or the Vedic era. The story depicts the problematic journey of Madhavi from being a princess to a short-term wife to three kings and a sage and, after that becoming a provisional mother to her four sons. Everyone except Madhavi, has something to gain. Yayati has the satisfaction of helping a mendicant; the three

childless kings beget worthy heirs for their kingdom; Vishwamitra gains six hundred horses of such rare specifications and the pleasure of living with beautiful Madhavi and lastly, Galava gets extolled for guru-dakshina and hence relieved of his obligations towards his teacher.

The episode of Madhavi has been vehemently criticised and labelled as misogynist in recent times. The circumstances in the story showcase insensitivity to a woman's feelings, depriving her of any personal space or desire and wiping out her individuality. Madhavi has been ripped from any control over her life. It appears horses are more significant than a woman, and women are being traded to get hold of good horses. Madhavi is portrayed as a scapegoat being passed on from one male to another, leaving behind her newborn each time. In the end, this character neither turns out to be a wife nor a mother, despite having lived with four men and delivering four sons. This viewpoint is valid to a certain extent when viewed through post-modern or feminist lenses. An alternate view also falls under the umbrella term "Hermeneutics." Hermeneutics is the art of understanding and interpreting a particular story considering its time of existence, and appreciating the cultural and social norms that must have impacted it. This approach provides a new lens to look at the same story differently, unlocking a broad spectrum of new standpoints and perceptions. So, before we impose our own set of perceptions or apply the present-day benchmarks of the rights and privileges accorded to women in our society to judge Madhavi, let us pause and place her story in the context of her time and look at the then-established norms prevalent and accepted by the community. There is nothing lewd about this episode, as depicted in the Epic. Every character of the story is earnest and does one's utmost to live honestly with righteous intent.

Galava does all he can to fulfil his obligation to his teacher. The teacher does not want anything from Galava in return for what he has taught him for several years. Nevertheless, Galava, an honest and sincere student, is adamant about giving Guru Dakshina and getting free from obligations. Galava portrays his immense dedication and reverence towards his teacher. His commitment guides him throughout his journey of getting such rare horses.

Yayati discharges his duty as a King by providing a mendicant who seeks help. His wealth has been depleted, and he has no such horses with the required parameters, but he does not turn his back on the seekers. The saints and their disciples were worshipped as gods in that era. The kings, reverent towards saints and mendicants, try never to disappoint them. So, Yayati offers his daughter. Girls were supposed to be the highly precious possession a father could have. Hence, offering his much beloved and adored daughter Yayati showcases his conviction and dedication as a king towards a mendicant. While handing over his daughter to Galava, Yayati praises the virtues of his daughter and remarks that anybody would give his entire kingdom to be with his daughter, even for a short interval. Yayati is aware of her daughter's merit and announces it with pride in front of the seekers.

The character Madhavi has been criticised on three significant issues.

1. Women were objectified in Vedic or Pre-Vedic era. They were used as bartering objects, as depicted in the case of Madhavi.
2. Women were deprived of motherhood like Madhavi had been denied the pleasure of motherhood even after giving birth to four sons.
3. Sexual pleasures were enjoyed solely by men. Polygamy was accepted, but polyandry was made fun of.

There is no reference in Mahabharata that Madhavi is forced to go with Galava to different kings. When Yayati is approached by Galava for a favour, being incapable of helping the seekers, Madhavi is given to Galava. Yayati does not have enough money to salvage Galava, so Madhavi goes with Galava of her volition to save her father from infamy.

Madhavi considers her filial duty to save her father from the disgrace of not helping a mendicant who comes to his kingdom seeking help. To assist a dedicated pupil in fulfilling his promise to his teacher, Madhavi suggests earnestly arranging her exchange for the horses. The Kings who have Madhavi in their lives, even briefly, never consider this relationship scandalous. All the relationships that Madhavi has gone through are open out there. There is nothing disgraceful or reprehensible.

Madhavi is denied motherhood and gets transferred from one King to another. This is true. This denial of motherhood has to be understood in

the backdrop of specific circumstances that Madhavi is into. Galava has to get those horses from different kings, and Madhavi has gone along with Galava only to help him get those horses. She cannot afford to spend any extra period in a kingdom. So, after giving birth, she has to push off leaving the baby under the care of its father. Moreover, men also have to face these situations in life. Bhima was deprived of fatherhood when he had to leave his son, Ghatotkacha. Arjuna had to leave his sons Abhimanyu and Babruvahana for a cause. The force of circumstances denies certain privileges to certain people at certain periods regardless of gender. So, it is not fair to judge Vedic society on the grounds of marginalisation based on gender, at least not in the case of Madhavi. Besides, her society treats her with great respect for rescuing three royal lines from dynastic extinction. Madhavi's sons are well aware of their birth antecedents. They gladly call themselves the sons of Madhavi. The fact that they are the sons of the common wife of four kings does not prevent them from ascending to the throne of their respective fathers. Sibi and Ashtaka are preferred over the other sons of their father's respective wives. When Madhavi gets a chance to meet her grown-up sons, she is greeted with reverence and immense respect by her sons.

*mâdhavîm preksya râjânas te 'abhivâdyedam abruvan
kim âgamanakrtyam te kim kurvah ûâsanam tava
âjñâpyâ hi vayam sarve tava putrâs tapodhane (2)*

At the end of the story, Madhavi meets her father in the forest, and at her command, her four sons help their maternal grandfather to ascend to heaven again. Madhavi's journey portrays an air of ruffled dignity. She has been faithful to her independent and bold nature, fulfilling her womanhood in a manner she found apt in each predicament. Her detached and indifferent attitude to her unique encounters with four men defines her virgin status. At the end of the story, Madhavi exercises her choice of retiring into the woods without remorse.

The third criticism is about sexual pleasures being given to men and not women. Polyandry is not uncommon in the tales of Mahabharata. Kunti and Draupadi are strong characters that pertain to polyandric

relationships. Besides, women get a chance to select their partners in Swamvarams. Polyandry was not uncommon; it was just not that rampant compared to polygamy. This was due to the frequent wars that resulted in men's demise more than women's. In that era, the kings who won the war took care of the wives and daughters of the rivals by getting married to them and providing them with food and shelter.

Madhavi's story emerges in Mahabharata, but she belongs to the Vedic Era. The social ethos, culture and customs, the idea of marriage, and the behaviour towards women from that era differ from the periods afterwards. The society never remains static. It goes through a continuous and prolonged process of evolution and transformation. The event period belonging to Mahabharata is very much different from the one before Mahabharata. Mahabharata society is way more diverse than Vedic society. The values, norms, culture, customs, and social conduct do not merely differ between the two eras; it shows remarkable variance during Mahabharata. This is why the social values and customs reflected in the early parts of the Epic are non-identical from the prevalence followed by the later period. So, the social ethos or customs variance must not be seen as transgression. It is just the dichotomy that remarks the finale of one era and the dawn of the other. It is interesting how perceptions and values change in a society in due course of time. This shift is usually the result of the challenges or demands of a particular era. In certain affairs, the Pre-Vedic or Vedic women are favoured with liberty and social approval, which is missing in the present age. Today women get easily judged by the parameters of a patriarchal society. There are a set of norms that suggests what women should do and, more importantly, what they should not do. Women in the Vedic era need not be vocal about their rights because these rights are utterly known and followed by society. They were given due respect, and their bold and unconventional steps were considered and accepted by society. Today women are tagged as feminists for being vocal about their rights and for grasping their position in society. Mahabharata depicts a steady degradation of what was once a cohesive society that adored liberal values. The society in the early period of Mahabharata was more open-minded, non-

judgemental, and accepting than our present-day society. As we proceed with the stories of later generations narrated by the Epic, we realise the views and values of society get rigid, showing a downward trend that has continued for centuries.

Virginity was regarded as an inculcable value in the Epics. Only a few virtuous women were blessed with the potentiality of retaining or regaining maidenhood. Madhavi mentions her boon of virginity by which she can regain her virginity each time she gives birth to a child. There are several instances in Epics where women possess the unique quality of recurring virginity. Satyavati became a virgin after giving birth to Vyasa. Kunti also became a maiden each time after delivering a son. Virginity does not refer to the state of their bodies but to the state of their being. Virginity alludes to the unsullied mind and attitudes of those incredible and bold women who face trials and tribulations yet choose detachment over attachment and independence over bondage. The women who pertained to polyandrous relationships were respected by the ancients and called Kanyas, which meant they were psychologically pure and untainted. Kanya's status also referred to how they fiercely asserted their independence. Each did whatever needed to be done based on their sense of duty, being true to themselves and their nature. These Kanyas of Mahabharata had to endure countless spanners in their work and life, yet these "women of substance" were not broken down by such hardships. Each went on to live with pride and dignity.

Mary Esther Harding, in her book "Woman's Mysteries" writes,

"The woman who is psychologically a virgin is not dependent; she is what she is because that is what she is one-in-herself (and) does what she does not because of any desire to please, not to be liked or to be approved even by herself but because what she does is true. Her actions may, indeed, be unconventional." (125-126).

She further remarks:

"He does not know the difference before love and after love, before motherhood, and after motherhood... Only a woman can know that and speak of that. She must always be as her nature is. She must

always be a maiden and always be a mother. Before every love she is a maiden; after every love, she is a mother.” She elsewhere, while talking of purity of love says “Every Mother is a virgin. She is pure in love to her child. Every child comes out of pure love.”(134-135).

These lines perfectly illustrate Madhavi’s life and her experiences with men. Her recurring marriage and childbearing were unconventional actions taken to fulfil the duty of saving a father from disgrace. Madhavi’s decision resulted in life saviour steps for Galava and the three kings. Like Madhavi, many women sacrificed their life for the welfare of others, and hence these women were regarded and adorned by society. Very few people dare to do something for the others. Johann Jacob Meyer, in his “Sexual Life in Ancient India”, remarks, “As is well known, the polygamy of the man in Aryan India is as old as the hills and does not form the slighted offence in the Brahminic system, although since Vedic times, indeed, one wife is seen to be the usual, often the obvious thing. On the other hand, polyandry is utterly repugnant to Indian feelings. In the Epic, only one or two cases of it are found, and these are exclusively cases of a community of wives among brothers” (108).

The tales that belong to the early part of the Epic Mahabharata indicate that women enjoyed a greater degree of freedom compared to the period afterwards. Women took decisions on crucial matters and were respected even after their unconventional and bold decisions. They were usually not discriminated based on gender. Their viewpoints were highly regarded on education, marriage, re-marriage, household management, and property. There were many instances of women fighting on the battlefield along with the men. No society is perfect; even Plato’s Utopian society was not perfect. Women of the bygone era had to endure sorrows and sufferings, but these were not because they were women. Depravity, social injustice, and evil exist in all societies, whether ancient or modern. The Vedic societies must also have flaws, but they appeared tolerant and moderately unbiased.

Conclusion

Myth is a symbolic way of representing truth, while its misinterpretation creates confusion in the minds of budding readers. The upsurge in the readability of mythological content is because today's youth is keen to get acquainted with their cultural roots. The inclination towards this genre has sparked because of the emergence of new readers who have grown up listening to mythological tales from their ancestors. Knowing about the bygone era creates pride, especially in Indian culture. This paper attempts to depict people's viewpoints, thinking, and customs through tales of the era to which Mahabharata belongs and which was very different from the one we live in today.

Works Cited

- Adluri, Vishwa. "Ethics and Hermeneutics in the Mahâbhârata." *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 20.3 2016.
- Y. Fernando Tola, Carmen Dragonetti. "Aspects of Western Cultural Intolerance: On the Hermeneutical Approach to the Mahabharata." Pensamiento. 2013.
- Tandon, Tariqa. "The Palace Of Illusion: A Book Review." *Alternative International Journal*. 2013.
- Bhattacharya, Pradip. "Of Kunti and Satyawati : Sexually Assertive Women of the Mahabharata" Meyer, Johann Jakob. *Sexual life in Ancient India*. Standard Literature, 1952.
- Harding, M. Esther. *Woman's Mysteries: Ancient and Modern*. Harpercollins, 1976.
- Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Myth=Mithya*. Penguin Books, 2006
- Meyer, Johann Jakob. *Sexual life in ancient India*. Standard Literature, 1952.
- Rajendran, A. "Story of Madhavi in the Mahabharata". Story of Madhavi in the Mahabharata |Hindu Blog. <https://www.hindu-blog.com/2017/12/story-of-madhavi-in-mahabharata.html>
- Piparaiya, N. "Story of Sage Galava and Madhavi". *Yoganama*. <https://yoganama.com/story-sage-galava/>. published on April, 2018.