

Sita (Character from the Indian epic –Ramayana), Draupadi and Gandhari (Characters from another Indian epic – Mahabharata) - A Comparative Study among Three Major Mythological Female Characters - Gandhari: An exception-

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Abstract There are lots of female characters in Mahabharata and Ramayana but few characters enchant people of all ages and all classes. Mass people admit that Sita should be the icon of all women. Draupadi though a graceful character yet not to be imitated. Comparatively, Gandhari's entrance into the epic is for a short while; though her appearance is very negligible, yet our research work is to show logically that Gandhari among these three characters is greater than the greatest. We think and have wanted to prove that Gandhari with her short appearance in the epic, excels all other female characters-depicted in Mahabharata and Ramayana.

Keywords Mahabharata, Ramayana, Sita, Draupadi, Gandhari

1. Introduction

Ramayana: Ramayana is an epic composed by Valmiki based on the life history of Ram-the king of the then Oudh and is divided into seven cantos (Kanda). Sita was Ram's devoted wife and queen of the same. Through many battles, lots of what and what-nots, the story proceeds depicting thousands of characters amongst which Ram, Sita, Laxman – brother of Ram and Ravana (the then king of Lanka) are the main characters.

Mahabharata: This is one of the greatest epics of the world composed by Krishna-Dipayyana Ved Byaas. This epic is based on two Indian famous dynasties' battle over empire, power and honor. These dynasties are known as Pandavas and Duryadhans – Sons of Dhritarastra, who was the king of the then Hastinapur and was also by –born blind. The date of the composition of Mahabharata is a controversial topic. The ancient Indian historians say that it had been composed more than three thousand years before the birth of Christ. But European historians point the date within five to three B.C. However, it is completed in

eighteen chapters. Again these chapters have been divided into one hundred sub-chapters. There are one lac (hundred thousand) verses in Mahabharata. Pandu, Kunti, Draupadi and her five husbands, Dhritarastra, Gandhari and their one hundred tyrannic sons – all are some of the famous and notorious characters from this great epic. Most of the Hindu rules and rituals, human related virtues and moralities are elaborately discussed in this epic. So, Mahabharata is often called the fifth Veda.

2. The Short Notes on Main Female Characters

- **Sita:** Sita, though known as Janaka's daughter and was called as Janaki also, yet not had been given birth by him; she one day came out of earth with the front part of the plough while King Janaka was ploughing land. That's why she is called 'Sita'
- **Draupadi:** Draupadi, daughter of king Draupad of kingdom of Panchal is often called Panchali. As she was a bit black she was called 'Krishna' also which means black.
- **Gandhari:** Gandhari, is the daughter of Subal, king of Gandhar who was married to the prince of Hastinapur named Dhritarastra. He was by born blind.

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3. Other Characters from the Stories' Main Stream

- **Kunti:** Mother of Pandavas, she was a princess of Yadu dynasty and daughter of king Shur – sister of Basudeva who is father of Lord Krishna.
- **Madri:** She was the princess of the kingdom of Madra and Pandu's second wife. She was the mother of Nakul and Shahadeva- and eventually Madri went to "Shahamarana" which meant to die willingly with dead husband.
- **Subhadra:** Step sister of Krishna and the second wife of Arjuna.
- **Sudrani:** Mother of Bidur and slave of Kuru Dynasty.
- **Pandu:** Descendant of Chandra Royal dynasty but being impotent, permitted his wife Kunti to make love with others and thus she gave birth to the sons – name Yudhistir (Son of Dharma), Vima (Son of Pawan), Arjuna (Son of Indra- king of Paradise), Nakul and Shahadeva (Son of Ashwini kumars). They are called Pandavas.
- **Bidur:** Step brother of Dhritarashtra and Pandu but never got royal honor as his mother Sudrani was a slave of that family and of low birth.

In this subcontinent, Hindu mythology is very rich and famous for its characters- especially female characters. The writers of these epics i.e. Ramayana and Mahabharata have created these characters successfully and are also successful in creating the 'willing suspension of poetic disbelief'¹. Every successful writer creates this and the writers of these epics are no exception. They compel the readers to believe all the happenings postponing the action of the disbelief through their artistic convincing power.

Gandhari and Draupadi these two female characters are from Mahabharata. There is a sameness between them that both of them are queens though Draupadi on the other hand a devoted wife. Gandhari enters into the epic almost at the end of it- with all the grandeur and gravity of a queen as well as a king's mother.

But in Ramayana, we find Sita as a queen though she appears as a more devoted wife than a queen. In this point, to show the universal social acceptance Bankim Chandra rightly says that many female characters in Hindu literature are depicted as the followers of Sita but not a single character followed Draupadi.

Here is the difference- and the difference is on the point of morality, Hinduism permits Draupadi and believes in her having five husbands though there exists 'willing suspension of poetic disbelief' but it does not permit any other character to commit such immoral act. Draupadi is a unique and wonderful creation of the writer of Mahabharata even then he did not show any miserliness in characterizing other female characters. The female characters of this epic who are

in the main stream, Gandhari is bright with her own gravity.

Grave female characters are available in Mahabharata- there are characters like Kunti, Subhadra and many others. On the other side, most of the critics make some conventional comments about Sita though her appearance in Ramayana is graceful, full of grandeur and ownness. Her eternal entrance into the earth is the extreme outburst of her individuality and gracefulness. In the open Royal Court, king Ramchandra, her husband sitting in front of her on the throne- she is ordered that she should go through the Acid Test (Agni-Pariksha).

It was actually an extreme humiliation of femininity by the male dominated society- so, on behalf of all women, Sita chooses a different way willingly. Her deed was a suitable answer to false accusation of the then general mass. Husband's appeal or order- nothing could derail her from her own decided duty. From this point of view, we may say that Sita was not a mere shadow who followed and obeyed Ram's order blindly, but in her deeds we find a rebel woman who denied to stoop and come beneath her husband ; as a result we find-her eternal entrance into the earth.

The character of Draupadi is well decorated and more colorful. This character is like a bright and vivid picture but unlike Sita, she blindly follows her husbands, just like a devoted housewife she follows them to the forest without any protest though at that time she was also a queen. Like other simple and common Hindu house wives, she does not raise any question but silently obeys everything as if she were destined to suffer all these pangs and sufferings. Here, she is a bit dim but Sita is excellent- that's why Sita's character was followed and imitated for thousand of years, when Draupadi was not much able to draw the attention and sympathy of the general people. She had no way because in male dominated society, she had nothing else to do. She had no mental strength like Sita- rather we find her as a shy and most devoted wife, devoted daughter-in law in Mahabharata.

Gandhari who was the king's mother- we find her short appearance in Mahabharata. It is a rare character created by the author. Draupadi is bright and colorful character but side by side Gandhari's character is like a pencil-sketch. In the main story, Gandhari's first appearance introduces her to us as a submissive wife though a great mystery lies hidden there. She was named Gandhari because she was the princess of Gandhar, daughter of king Subal, wife of Dhritarashtra and mother of Duryadhan brothers. King Subal wished to marry his daughter off with by-born blind Dhritarashtra and performed it in just time. Though she was beautiful and accomplished, did not raise any question against her parents and surrendered herself to her blind husband but not unconditionally. Taking a vow not to overcome her husband's blindness, she covers her own eyes with a piece of cloth and in this way this queen withdraws herself from everything, hides herself from everybody and in this way she subsides some other facts which are cruel but heart-rendering. It is as if she had covered the eyes of all the sighted people of the world. Her blindness is symbolic; it is as if she were mocking all other sighted people of the world. Amidst of her

¹ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor; *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817, in two volumes. Chapter XIV.

such misery, she is blessed by Byaasdev (a saint) that she would be the mother of one hundred sons and one daughter. In due time she becomes pregnant but after passing of two years, no child is born. Besides this, she hears Kunti (her sister-in-law) has given birth to a son like the sun; this makes her more furious and worried; out of grief, she aborts without saying anything to her husband. After lots of miraculous happenings, her all sons and one daughter take birth. Her eldest son Duryadhan, very notorious from his boyhood becomes envious of the Pandava brothers and out of envy, he arranges a deceitful game of Dice and in a tactic way, he defeats the Pandavas, insults Draupadi in the open Royal Court by trying to rob her clothes and then forces them to leave for the forest. For all these tyranny, Gandhari, though mother of Duryadhan brothers, accuses her sons and requests her husband to forsake Duryadhan. In fact, being a righteous lady, she cannot but say the just thing. But her husband was not only physically blind, but also blind to his sons refuses to keep her request, so it had no appeal. However, Gandhari never mercies her sons for their disrespectful behavior. Because, she by her meditation, comes to know it before that her sons would be destroyed only for the destructive motives of Duryadhan and that leads her to request her husband to forsake him. Gandhari tries her best to make a treaty by giving half of the kingdom to the Pandava who, at that time, are freed on condition. After twelve years of exile in forest and one year of hiding when the Pandavas send their messenger to Hastinapur to regain their kingdom from Duryadhans, then Gandhari coming to the Royal court and rebuking her son Duryadhan, advises him to make a treaty and warns him telling that immoral motive of getting wealth brings death in the long run. But the moral saying falls flat upon them. Before going to the warfield of Kurukshetra Duryadhan comes to Gandhari-his mother to seek blessings; at that moment she says only these words that, where there is virtue, there is the victory. In eighteen days war, she utters these words to her son everyday. For this reason later we see that after the death of Duryadhan, Krishna consoles Gandhari saying that it is her saying that where there is virtue, there is victory- is proved true. So, she should control herself. Hearing this, Gandhari remains quiet for sometime but again in front of Krishna she covers her face with her stole and begins to lament for her son. At one stage she was about to curse the Pandavas, then Ved Byaas comes and makes her quiet. At last Gandhari, out of rage wants to meet Yudhishtir. He becomes frightened and ready to take the curse- falls to her feet saying that – it is he who killed her son. Gandhari underneath the cover of her eyes only could see the top of Yudhishtir's fingers. As a result, his nails become pale. On the other hand, though having all the power to stop this war Krishna does not do that so Gandhari by the virtue which she has gained for devotion to her husband, curses him saying that after thirty-six years from that day, he also will lose everything and will be killed very cruelly in the forest and Yadav women will lament for him like Kaurava and Pandava women now do. This curse of Gandhari comes true

at the mentioned time.

After the victory of Pandavas, Dhritarastra and Gandhari live in the shelter of them. The Pandavas in all respect, honor them very much. Only Vima secretly uses to over look Dhritarastra and does the things which he dislikes. After sometime Gandhari and her husband go to Banprasth by the side of the river Ganges.

Kunti, Bidur and other Kaurava women also go with them. There they build an Ashrama and Gandhari begins to live with others. While they were in Ashrama, Gandhari begins to meditate by drinking water only. Then they begin to live in woods where one day, suddenly in forest fire, Dhritarastra, Kunti and Gandhari die.

Now from the above discussion and from the following points of view, it may be considered that:

- Gandhari, though she gets a by born blind husband and of weaker personality than the other two main characters like Sita and Draupadi yet she shows her devotion as well as protest against destiny by binding a cloth over her eyes and in this way closing her eyes from this worldly life for ever.
- She never gives indulgence to her children rather she again and again tells her husband to forsake her son but Dhritarastra does not do so.
- She never curses the Pandavas though she lost her one hundred sons- in the war as she was an idol of virtuousness.
- On the eve of the war, when her son Duryadhan comes to her to seek blessings, then she utters only the words that where there is virtue, there is victory. It is known to her that her sons are involved in immoral deeds. So, it is not a blessing rather it is a curse.
- Gandhari has an anti war sentiment. So, she rebukes her son saying that immoral motive of getting wealth brings death in the long run.
- She is the only female character among Ramayana's and Mahabharata's who rebukes her husband and sons for their immoral activities. She rebels, protests and does not surrender herself to destiny like Sita or Draupadi.
- Addressing her as Subal's daughter Krishana himself told that woman like her is rare in the worlds- because Gandhari – with the power of her meditation could burn the whole world which was not possible for Sita or Draupadi- though they are also devoted house wives.
- We cannot forget that Geeta is a part of Mahabharata. Here, it is to be noted that one of the greatest historians- Will Durant expresses the importance of Geeta and tries to prove that the negligence of the morality of Geeta is the main cause of India's subordination for years. He says.

'Embedded in the narrative of the great battle in the loftiest philosophical poem in the world's literature- the Bhagavad

Gita or lord's song.... All in all it was a good lesson which India had learned it might have kept her free'.² In this regard, we may say that the character of Gandhari is a mixture of goodness and justice. So, as a female character of Mahabharata. Gandhari can become an idol of women folk.

4. Conclusions

In the original story of Mahabharata Gandhari appears as an independent character at the last of the Shaylla chapter and in Wife chapter. The war has been finished, Duryadhan has been killed by Vima in an illegal battle. But Gandhari is such a strong personality that she never mercies the crime of her own son. Even she never envies the Pandavas. She becomes very angry when her sons insult Draupadi in the open Royal Court and she takes it for certain that her sons should die for this. She considers Draupadi's humiliation as all women's humiliation and tries to control her sons with iron rod, again she does not hesitate to go against her husband for the sake of virtue. It is she who cannot say to her son, "My dear child, be winner," even then, when her son is going to war and death was his destiny. Because, if so, virtue would be defeated. She, though grieved for her one hundred sons' pre-mature death, does not forget virtue. The women are a power. This power can build up a foundation of conjugal happiness but in tragedy, this power acts like a destroyer. But what ever it does, in creation or in destruction woman remains mysterious. They are different form men. They are attractive. Yet in Ramayana, Sita destroys herself but with her- whole family destroys. Gandhari curses her sons, in the same way, curse also comes upon her. But Gandhari establishes herself as an idol of good ness- abandoning all enmity and envy. For any other famous female characters in Ramayana or Mahabharata it was not possible to rebel against the injustice which Gandhari does.

Gandhari with all her mental strength is an exception. She is the best instance of feminism. She is the super woman among all women characters of Ramayana and Mahabharata. She should be considered as the icon of all women. In conclusion, we may say that Gandhari is greater than the greatest among all the women characters in Hindu mythology especially in Ramayana and Mahabharata.

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² Durant, Will: *The History of civilization, Vol- I*, 1st edition, page - 564-567.