

MORAL-INTERROGATION AS SELF-EMPOWERMENT IN WOMEN OF THE *MAHĀBHĀRATA*

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Abstract. As a narrative that highlights the concept of ‘female agency’, the *Mahābhārata* depicts women employing a powerful mechanism of moral interrogation as a path to self-empowerment, while challenging systemic power structures, reconstructing social narratives and establishing individual dignity. The article unveils a method that transcends conventional narrative frameworks by examining the episodes associated with the ‘questioning spirit’ of Draupadī, Sāvitrī, and Śakuntalā, who, using a distinctive, resilient approach of ‘living the truth’ seek justice. The paper presents a reflective analysis of Draupadī’s challenge in the royal assembly, Sāvitrī’s dialogue with death (Yama), and Śakuntalā’s unwavering commitment to truth, illustrating how these women embody multifaceted strategies of self-empowerment. They transform their personal experiences into universal moral challenges, wielding language as a powerful instrument of social reconstruction. Their moral interrogation is not merely a rhetorical device but a means for the *Mahābhārata* to showcase how it transcends gender binaries and maintains the ever-evolving dynamics of *dharma*. While exploring issues of life and existence, the paper demonstrates that the women of the *Mahābhārata* are not portrayed as weak, explicating that colonial perspectives project their vulnerability and helplessness without recognising the deeper structure of the text, which includes the philosophically and ethically enlightening questions posed by the female protagonists. The write-up also offers a distinct view of the *Mahābhārata*’s approach to challenging what is morally questionable and emphasising on the genuine strength and self-determination of women in ancient India.

Keywords: *Mahābhārata*, *Dharma*, Dilemma, Female Agency, Gender Justice, Moral Interrogation, Self-empowerment, Truth.

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1. Introduction

The *Mahābhārata* as an *Itihāsa*¹ formulates the concept of female agency wherein women transcend their traditional identities through moral interrogation as a path to self-empowerment in their individual pursuit of truth. It is examined in the article as how women in this historical exposition raise significant ethical questions which serve as philosophical tools to confront and challenge the systemic flow of power, reshape social narratives, establish personal dignity and self-worth, as well as protect their lives. They are symbols of courage, confidence, knowledge, wisdom and clarity; and in posing questions which encourage those around them to engage in compulsive moral self-reflection. The questions of ‘why’, ‘what’ and ‘how’ as often raised by the women in the *Mahābhārata* serve as a starting point for ethical discussions related to the complexities of dharma as inherent in the book.

This article studies the ‘interrogating/questioning’ spirit of only three female characters from the rich galleria of the women in the *Mahābhārata* - Draupadī, Śakuntalā and Sāvitrī - whose methods of interrogation are not mere standardised forms of resistance but are intellectual and moral practices that make way for the deconstruction of the dynamics of power, arrogance attached to the positions and difficult-mindedness of persons. All these address inequalities and reconstruct the understanding of *dharma* within the *Mahābhārata*. Focusing solely on Draupadī’s well-known challenge in the royal assembly, Śakuntalā’s unwavering commitment to truth and Sāvitrī’s dialogue with death, some clarity emerges through this write-up about how women of this *Itihāsa* seek self-empowerment through different strategies. They turn their personal experiences into universal symbols of moral resistance and use language—both as a source of their strength and as a powerful tool for social reform and change.

As the moral interrogation becomes more serious through the landscape of the distinguished *Itihāsa*, it paves the way for discussions on gender equality in the *Mahābhārata* - ancient textbook of vast proportions, in which India continues to show no signs of losing

¹This writeup is a decolonial reading and interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* thus the text is mentioned as *Itihāsa* and not epic. The Indian textual tradition classifies classical texts by their mode of transmission and epistemic authority. *Śruti*, meaning ‘that which is heard’, encompasses the *Vedas* and *Upaniṣads*, which are cosmic, impersonal, eternal revelations with no human authorship. *Smṛti* means ‘that which is remembered’ and comprises texts composed by known sages, including the *Dharmaśāstras* and *Purāṇas*. Within the *Smṛti* tradition falls the category *Itihāsa*, which includes the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. *Itihāsa* etymologically derives from the Sanskrit *iti-ha-āsa*, meaning ‘thus indeed it was’, signifying that it is a sacred historical witness with all three elements: cosmological, ethical and didactic. The word ‘epic’, from the Homeric tradition, cannot adequately portray the nature of the *Mahābhārata* as an *Itihāsa* wherein engagement with it, is engaging with a living repository of *dharma*-based constructions of gender, moral agency and ethics that continue to influence the law, social practices and cultural identities in India.

interest, engagement and participation. This write-up examines how moral interrogations by female characters create epistemic mechanisms for gender equality.

2. Agency, Interrogation, Gender and Truth in the *Mahābhārata*

The narrative of the *Mahābhārata* is not just about the lives and achievements of men but also about the words and wisdom of women. It presents women as a flow of life, who can not only perceive truth but also are competent to guide it towards the greater reality. While the men in the text often fail to give voice to sane perspectives, it is the female characters who, more than the male heroes, speak what is considered the social truth—what is right for the *Kṣatriya*-s and what constitutes an appropriate human behaviour. If the *Mahābhārata* gains its momentum through the actions of its heroes, then it cannot be overlooked that the ‘*She-roes*’ of the text maintain the consistency of *dharma*. They are the *satyavādīnī*-s, ‘speakers of truth’, or *dharmachārīnī*-s ‘one whose conduct embodies dharma’ (McGrath, 2009). A closer analysis of the book reveals that this insight comes from the women of the *Mahābhārata*, through their moral interrogations regarding truth, morality, and dharma, as they exercise their agency.

Regarding the female voices in this *Itihāsa*, Vemsani (2021, p.246) states, “Each woman uniquely displayed female agency and courage facing challenges. The most arduous challenge each of the feminine leaders faced is their unique journey”. Their journeys become distinctive because of their questions about truth, their challenge to untruth, and their addressing the right in opposition to the wrong. When analysing the questions of truth in relation to the women characters, Chaturvedi (2008) offers a distinct interpretation, explaining that the truth, which can never be fully expressed through *vāc* - speech - is often realised in the “living of truth” (p. 6) by the women characters in the epic. This raises an important hermeneutic question: What is it that we ought to observe in the epic?

We observe that women in the *Mahābhārata* embody truth through the process of moral interrogation, especially when the path of *dharma* is transgressed or digressed. The method of interrogation as used by the women here is not only logical but also moral, involving the questioning of opposing views in practice to highlight gender equality. This upholds and fosters a culture of moral interrogation wherein the voices of women are not muted. In fact, Veda Vyāsa ensures spaces for them to keep the tradition of interrogation alive throughout the narrative, which clearly shows that the *Mahābhārata* is a text in progression and never regressive in nature. He also introduces the concept of gender equality in ancient Indian tradition through the *Mahābhārata* - depicting gender as an idea of oneness rather than as two opposing binaries.

In light of the ongoing debate on gender, it is essential to briefly examine how gender is understood in the Western philosophical context through the dialectical opposition—i.e., as a binary marked by conflict, difference and hierarchy. Historically, Aristotle, at the helm of the Western tradition, links masculinity to the active form and femininity to the passive matter, thereby establishing an asymmetry between the two that has shaped the language of Western feminism (Irigaray, 1985; Tuana, 1992). This opposition is further developed in Hegel's dialectic (though it is not a gendered theory). It provides later thinkers a rationale for conceptualising gender difference as rooted in negation and struggle (Butler, 1987). Taking the cue, Beauvoir (1949/2011) presents her famous argument that a woman is not born but made, and that she is the 'Other', as always measured and evaluated in terms of the male norm, which is the established (default) human subject. Later feminists and queer ideologues tried to challenge this binary but couldn't step outside the basic structure that had been laid down earlier (Butler, 1990). The idea of gender equality that stemmed from this tradition is a kind of compensation because it tries to balance two categories that are, at the outset, separate and unequal. Fraser (1997) argued that equality (in Western thought) is defined in relation to difference and cannot fully escape the binary logic that it seeks to fix. Thus, the Western dialectical model of gender cannot be a universal epistemic foundation. Instead, it is a cultural framework limited to the Western metaphysical perspective, in which gendered hierarchies form part of a broader structure of domination that Shiva (1988) argues is rooted in Cartesian dualism and elevates the mind over the body, culture over nature, and the subject over the object.

However, gender plays a significant role in the *Mahābhārata*, both in portraying and in reconstructing gender issues as continual elements within the text while transcending all binaries. As a cultural narrative, the *Mahābhārata* has also shaped gender roles and responsibilities in ancient India, and its retellings and interpretations have consistently added new dimensions to debates over gender and social norms in the Indian subcontinent. Within the *Mahābhārata*'s culture (unlike the Western tradition highlighted above), gender is not a fixed or stable identity. It is marked by fluidity, with layers, and it is intentionally unsettled at various points (Hiltebeitel, 2001; Doniger, 1999; Vanita & Kidwai, 2000). For example, the character of Śikhaṇḍī, who by birth is a female, is raised as a male but is never fully claimed by any gender category. This character does not find a place at the fringes in the moral design of the *Mahābhārata*. It is also not accepted as an erroneous creation. In fact, Śikhaṇḍī sits at the centre while playing a decisive role in the unfolding of *dharma* on the battlefield (Hiltebeitel, 2001). Arjuna's transformation into Brhannalā deserves mention too. His gendered modulation is not simply an act of disguise. It is a

crossing over to a different gendered experience, which the *Mahābhārata* presents as fully consistent rather than as a contradiction of Arjuna's larger identity (Doniger, 1999). The text does not treat these as anomalies that require explanation and resolution. They are sanctified within the text's broader cosmic vision. It does not seem to present equality as a balance between opposing binaries. Instead, it appears to expect the reader not to view masculine and feminine as rival categories, but rather as different expressions of a single, undivided reality (*Advaita*).

Generally, the gendered writings on the *Mahābhārata* focus primarily on events and actions related to the lives of Satyawatī, Kuntī, Gāndhārī, Draupadī, Gaṅgā, Ambā, and others—the female protagonists who undoubtedly raise pertinent questions when faced with morally uncomfortable situations. These women are not morally passive spectators. However, this write-up steps back to highlight their notable predecessors who have been regarded as pillars of strength and stand as inspiration for the key characters in the textual narrative. By prioritising Draupadī's interrogation in this discussion and briefly highlighting her spirit of questioning, the article aims to illustrate that her notions of 'rightness' and the concept of 'achieving the impossible' may have been influenced not only by the immediate senior women around her but also by her distant ancestors/seniors like Śakuntalā and Sāvitrī. Their words embody power, patience, brilliance, and eloquence, which are discussed further in the write-up.

3. Draupadī's Interrogation as a Challenge to the Power and Political

All of us are familiar with Draupadī's courageous question: *kiṃ nu pūrvaṃ parājaiṣīr ātmānaṃ māṃ nu bhārata* — “Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?” (*Mbh.2.67.7*)². All men in the assembly are confused about how would they answer this powerful question that would become a historical statement of fact bearing the discomfort in the mind that even posterity will seek an answer to this question from them. However, Draupadī's question does not fade away — her question is not merely about legality, but involves the moral credentials of all present in the court. The disappointment, the insult, and the disaster she experiences cannot be accepted/agreed upon at any cost. Her first question shakes the power structures, and her second query challenges the authority of all the kings in the court as she fearlessly reminds them of their sense of righteousness, moral responsibility and duty — *sa naṣṭaḥ kauraveyeṣu pūrvo dharmah sanātanaḥ* - “Where is the Dharma of these kings?” (*Mbh. 2.69.9*).

²All the Sanskrit verses and their translation are taken from Dutt, M.N. (2001). *Mahābhārata: Sanskrit Text with English Translation*.

Her second interrogation is volcanic in nature, and its molten shakes the very moral foundations of the entire political assembly—the esteemed royal gathering that witnesses the gruesome game of dice in which Draupadī is waged. Draupadī’s moral questioning is a critique of societal norms and highlights the ethical helplessness of elders in the court. She affirms truth by living in accordance with it, and she expects the royal gathering to do the same—live by truth rather than merely being political symbols of it. She continues to question, even when no responses are given. However, she does not give up, which shows that the female protagonist’s mind is constantly in a mode of keeping the flame of questioning alive, and this is the epic’s way of addressing the broader issue of gender equality and women’s assertion of self-empowerment.

Being fiery by nature, Draupadī radiates energy and confidence even during times of turmoil. As Jayal (1996, p. 256) writes, “It is due to her intellectual attainments that Draupadī appears unique among the Epic heroines. In the face of calamities, she does not lose her composure or her reasoning ability...” In the gravest moments of humiliation and extreme violence against a woman, “She was the only one present to attempt to transform the situation of ordered violence into one of discussion” (McGrath, 2009, p. 166). By presenting her forceful moral argument, she insists that the court—the think tank of Hastināpur, understands the ethical foundation of her position. Draupadī’s questions expose the moral bankruptcy of power-based political structures and demonstrate that human dignity and respect are paramount for humanness in society. They also transcend all gender constructs. Her questioning becomes a method of knowledge generation, an exercise of her agency, imbuing the mode of interrogation with epistemic significance while elevating her individual experience to a universal philosophical statement. Draupadī upholds the element of truth and embodies ‘living the truth’ through her interrogations. Draupadī’s interrogation is never silenced by Veda Vyāsa, sending a clear message that moral silence is sinful.

4. Interrogation by Śakuntalā as Moral Confrontation

The feminine verbal potential also manifests in not-so-much-highlighted women characters within the text, such as Śakuntalā. Her grandly episodic role in *Ādiparvan* marks the first woman-centred narrative in the *Mahābhārata*. It seems that her persona intensely influences the women of the epic, as her ferocity, fury, and unwavering commitment to truth lay the foundation for female agency and serve as a guiding force for many women to voice their dissent against anything that conflicts with *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata*. When Śakuntalā and her son are rejected by King Duśyanta, who claims he does not recognise

her and cannot accept her, Śakuntalā, in anger, distinctly interrogates as how he is in a state of oblivion:

*ānann api mahārāja kasmād evaṃ prabhāṣase |
na jānāmīti niḥśaṅkaṃ yathānyaḥ prākṛto janah ||*

“Oh king, when you know everything, how can you, like a mean and *inferior man*, say that you know nothing?” (*Mbh.*1.74.25)

While presenting her interrogation as rooted in truth, she prompts the king to think and analyse what he is saying. She depicts him as a ‘robber of self’ (*caureṇātmāpahāriṇā*)³, implying he has the potential to commit any crime.⁴ The assertion is made that his heart knows the truth of her words, and he cannot ignore her speech, which exemplifies her determined resolve to seek justice for her son and herself. A warning of horrifying consequences is issued—

*yadi me yācamānāyā vacanaṃ na kariṣyasi |
duṣyanta śatadhā mūrdhā tatas te'dya sphuṭiṣyati ||*

“O Dushyanta, if you refuse what I ask you to do, your head will be divided into a thousand pieces today.” (*Mbh.*1.74.36)

Śakuntalā accuses Duṣyanta of lying, “like the vulgar’ (*prākṛtas tathā*), and discourses upon the importance and validity of truthful speech, condemning mendacity” (McGrath, 2009, p.160). She appears to have no moral hesitation in speaking about her own husband’s death and declares that her son will be the ruler of the world after him. For her, truth is the means and end of all human endeavours, the highest virtue⁵ and her faith in it empowers her, enabling her to recognise her independent identity as marked by fearlessness and forcefulness.

³yo 'nyathā santam ātmānam anyathā pratipadyate |
kiṃ tena na kṛtaṃ pāpaṃ caureṇātmāpahāriṇā ||

“He who has one thing in the mind, but represents another thing to others, is a thief and a robber of his own self. What sin is he not capable of committing?” (*Mbh.*1.74.27)

⁴atra te hṛdayaṃ veda satyaśyaivānṛtasya ca |
kalyāṇaṃ vada sāksyeṇa mātmanam avamanyathāḥ ||

“Your heart is witness to the truth or the falsehood of my words. Therefore, speak the truth and do not degrade yourself.” (*Mbh.*1.74.26)

⁵nāsti satyasamo dharmo na satyād vidyate param |
na hi tīvrataraṃ kiṃcid anṛtād iha vidyate ||

“There is no virtue equal to truth, there is nothing (in this world) superior to truth. And there is nothing (again) more sinful than falsehood.” (*Mbh.*1.74.105)

Śakuntalā's confrontation with King Duśyanta illustrates the philosophical concept of truth as an embodied experience. Using wise words, she warns the king that he would fail to accomplish anything if he demeaned his own wife and disowned his son. She emphasises the importance of truth and defends it as a virtue that surpasses all other human virtues. Śakuntalā stands firmly for truth (in her relations with her son and husband, as well as in her responsibility to seek justice for her son) and fights to uphold truth and its significance for moral existence. She endeavours to embody the concept/ideal/value of truth by 'living the truth'.⁶ Her compelling statement about the importance of remaining faithful to truth transforms her personal struggle into a universal principle of moral integrity. Her victory at the end of her debate, highlights the transformational power of unwavering truth.

Śakuntalā emerges as a woman who deserves to become immortal because of her conviction in truth, her morally grounded confidence and unyielding courage. The moral interrogation by her is a struggle to establish the truth and secure an honourable status for her son Bhārata. She epitomises and celebrates the idea of *dharma*, while exercising her moral agency and prioritising social morals over personal fulfilment. The *Mahābhārata*'s Śakuntalā remains an inspiration for women of today because she is the first female figure in the text to raise issues regarding women's rights and the rights of the child, and to promote the spirit of moral interrogation while pioneering the cultivation of virtues, such as truth being the source of self-empowerment.

5. Interrogation by Sāvitṛī as Dialectical Debate

Sāvitṛī, in the *Mahābhārata*, marries Satyavān out of her choice and will, while being fully aware that he will die within a year. When Yama, the God of Death, carrying a noose, comes to claim Satyavān's spirit, it is Sāvitṛī's intelligently compelling speech based on truth(of love and devotion) that morally challenges Yama, forcing him to stop and listen to her. She can sense the presence of Yama, taking away Satyavān's life. With a calm and fearless greeting to the lord, she boldly faces death directly. An ordinary mortal might have collapsed upon witnessing the presence of the God of Death. Still Sāvitṛī, as the devout wife with a strong sense of moral duty towards her husband, asks Yama why he has come to take her husband when his assistants could have done the job very efficiently. This question of hers demonstrates nothing less than Sāvitṛī's skill in intelligent communication and the art of interrogation to break the binaries of gender:

⁶Living the truth here means, embodying the truth in life and breath of one's existence while standing for its protection wherein 'truth' is *satya* that's non-negotiable. Badrinath Chaturvedi (2008, p.6) gives a distinct understanding of 'living the truth' which this writeup endorses and uses as the premise for the arguments in the course of all discussions.

*śrūyate bhagavan dūtās tavāgacchanti mānavān |
netum kila bhavān kasmād āgato 'si svayaṃ prabho ||*

“Sāvitrī said: We hear, O god that your emissaries come to take away men. How is it that your worshipful self has come in person?” (*Mbh.3.297.14*)

Yama is intrigued by her question and dissuades her from following him. Nevertheless, she insists on doing so, adhering to the *dharma* that requires a wife to accompany and follow her husband.

Through her logical arguments with Yama, drawing on her expertise in *dharma*⁷ and her clear, informed speech, Sāvitrī manages to win her husband back.⁸ She is able to impress Yama with her intellectual strength and dutifulness. She also secures an extension of the lives and fortunes of Satyavān's parents, restores sight to his father's eyes,⁹ and obtains a boon for her father to have a hundred sons.¹⁰

Sāvitrī's episode may not be about straightforward questioning. Still, she indirectly questions Yama through a lengthy ethical discourse, prompting him to reflect on his decision and marking a point of gender equality, where a woman participates in a challenging verbal exchange with death to save her husband, her father-in-law, and her father. A woman here is not an embodiment of sadness and helplessness, but one overflowing with feminine strength grounded in truth and love, which transforms the very idea of death. She is endowed with extraordinary spiritual and emotional vigour, governed by ethical rationality, which enables her to craft “prudent and judicious words to win over Death” (McGrath,

⁷*Mbh. 3.297.35, 36, 42, 43, 47-50...* in these verses it is well reflected that Sāvitrī has deep understanding of *dharma* as virtue, duty and righteousness. Through her intelligence, wisdom and ethical consciousness, she is able to impress Yama who in reality rewards her for her brilliance in duty consciousness.

⁸*mamātmajam satyavatas tathaurasam bhaved ubhābhyām iha yat kulodvham |
śatam suānām balavīryasālinām idam caturtham varayāmi te varam ||*

“Let me have one hundred strong and powerful sons, born of Satyavan's loins and begotten of both of us, who will perpetuate our line. This is the fourth boon I pray for.” (*Mbh.3.297.45*)

*na te 'pavargah sukṛtād vinākṛtas tathā yathānyeṣu vareṣu mānada |
varam vṛṇe jīvatu satyavān ayam yathā mṛtā hy evam aham patim vinā ||*

“The boon that you have (just) given me cannot bear fruit (without my union with my husband). Therefore, O bestower of honour, among other boons (that you have already granted me) I crave this boon that at Satyavana may be brought back to life. I am as good as dead without my husband.” (*Mbh.3.297. 52*)

⁹*cyutah svarājyād vanavāsam āśrito vinasṭacakṣuḥ śvaśuro mamāśrame |
sa labdhacakṣur balavān bhaven nṛpas tava prasādāj jvalanārkaṣaṇibhaḥ ||*

“Savitri said: My father-in-law has been driven away from this kingdom and has lost his eyes. He now leads a forest life our hermitage. Let that king through your grace be restored of his sight and be as powerful as the sun or fire.” (*Mbh.3.297.27*)

¹⁰*mamānapatyah pṛthivīpatiḥ pitā bhavet pituḥ putraśatam tathaurasam |
kulasya santānakararam ca yad bhavet tṛtīyam etad varayāmi te varam ||*

“My royal father is childless. Let him have one hundred sons, begotten by him, who will perpetuate his family. This is the third boon that I ask of you.” (*Mbh.3.297.38*)

2009, p.109). It is this trait that makes her truly a great woman orator of the epic. She harnesses the power of *Vāc*¹¹ and with her wisdom forces death (Yama) back to its(his) own space (his abode).

Sāvitṛī's approach is a calm and resolute confrontation with death, which is often a deadly experience for most. Like a clever, calculating and witty diplomat, she accepts whatever Yama offers while persevering in the quest/desire for more—namely, the well-being of her father-in-law and her father. At the end when she returns home with her husband and boons as granted, she has fulfilled her mission and earns an everlasting position among great women—the pativrata-s (Aklujkar, 2007). Whatever Sāvitṛī says or does, her intentions are crystal clear. All her efforts are to free her husband from the shackles of death so that 'life' could eternally shine on Satyavān. Herein, it can be said that Sāvitṛī, as mortal, has been claiming friendship with death and "from that ground of friendship, she started a conversation with Death, which was not about Death but about life, about relationships, of the self with the self, and of the self with the other" (Chaturvedi, 2008, p.65). Thus, while travelling with death, Sāvitṛī is in reality seeking life, enhancing it, and striving to foster the flourishing of the lives of all around her.

With five¹² boons at her disposal, she transforms the lives of many connected to her and those yet to come. Sāvitṛī's dialectical debate with Yama on life and death which is grounded in moral logic and founded in truth, challenges the predetermined cosmic narratives and elevates love (for her husband and humanity) to the degree of salvation. Regarding Sāvitṛī, it can be said that no other woman in the poem possesses the heroic verbal powers as she does, and that she ultimately proves to be the saviour of her entire family.¹³ She in her 'dialogue with death', is also 'living the truth' just like Śakuntalā. Her diligent effort to promote everyone's prosperity drives her to seek the boons for the happiness of all in her life. Sāvitṛī is on a mission to save her husband and, in turn, saves the entire race.

evam ātmā pitā mātā śvaśrūḥ śvaśura eva ca |
bhartuḥ kulam ca sāvitṛyā sarvaṃ kṛcchāt samuddhṛtam ||

¹¹*Vāc* ("speech")—One of the names of Sarasvatī, the Hindu goddess of speech, eloquence and all forms of knowledge. (<https://www.wisdomlib.org/definition/vac>)

¹²The first two boons being restoration of her father-in-law's eyesight and regaining of his kingdom in full glory; the third boon being her father King Aśvapati to beget a son; fourth boon was to beget 100 sons for herself and Satyavān; fifth boon was for the long life of Satyavān.

¹³*nimajjamānaṃ vyasanair abhidrutam kulam narendrasya tamopaye hrade |*
tvayā suśīlavratapūnyayā kulam samuddhṛtam sādhi punaḥ kulīnayā ||

"The Rishis said: O chaste girl, you are of gentle disposition, observant of vows, possessed of virtue and have sprung from a noble line. And it is by you that the line of this best of kings, overwhelmed with calamities and drowned in a deep gulf (of obscurity) has, (at last) been rescued." (*Mbh.*3.298.43)

“Thus Sāvitrī rescued from misfortune, her own self, her father, mother-in-law, father-in-law and her husband’s line.” (*Mbh.*3.299.14)

The moral interrogations in Sāvitrī’s dialogue with death, presented as moral discourse, are an effort by Veda Vyās to depict gender equality, in which women’s voices are not secondary but essential for raising social awareness and fostering social morality and well-being. Moreover, Sāvitrī displays a fearlessly upright personality. Complementing Sāvitrī, Bader (1987, p. 288) writes, “She united with courage to undertake, the firmness to accomplish her design. Here was an individuality made powerful by her belief in her own strength.”

6. Reflection

We consistently observe a similar pattern of questioning or moral interrogation by Ambā, Gāndhārī, Kuntī, Satyawatī, and many other women characters in the *Mahābhārata*. The issue of differing morals raises many challenging questions in this text on *Itihāsa*. Women become the torchbearers of the power of moral interrogations, which portrays their intellectual and philosophical competence as their questions are framed logically, even if at times metaphorically. While Draupadī’s moral interrogation defies her victimhood and calls for justice, Śānkuntalā’s moral interrogation is a refutation of marital deceit and a bold assertion of her child’s rights; wherein Sāvitrī’s moral dialogue with death is her way of interrogating death about life, while ensuring the longevity of life for all. All three protagonists, through their fearless questioning, portray the transcendence of gender binaries in the *Mahābhārata*. If one, i.e. Draupadī, through her powerful questions is securing the rights of a woman, the second, i.e. Śānkuntalā, through her moral fearlessness is safeguarding the life of her son(progeny), and the third, i.e. Sāvitrī, through her sharp-minded dutifulness is altruistically reviving and restoring a family—one finds that all three demonstrate their individual morals for the social benefit, beneficence and well-being. This is the symbolic representation of their exercise of autonomy, portrayal of agency based in their own efforts for self-empowerment. Their morally deep questions take us beyond what we can imagine. They make us question the moral and ethical bases of the actions of both men and women of the *Mahābhārata*. All three also embody and honour truth by ‘living the truth’. The great-grand text of Bhārata encourages questioning by both men and women, and these moral interrogations serve as testing grounds for customs, rituals and socially ingrained thought processes in the narrative. The *Mahābhārata* does not suppress the spirit of questioning or the quest for understanding—and that is why it remains relevant even in the 21st century.

The discussions of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* become richer and more sophisticated through these moral interrogations. It is also observed that *dharma* in the epic is constantly problematised and deconstructed, which is one way of expressing how unavoidable turbulence is created by the dispute between the moral and the immoral, making space for the entire process of new creation in the realm of *dharma*. This supports the idea that *dharma* is in a constant state of evolution in the *Mahābhārata*. It is not fixed but contains the element of fluidity. It exists in accordance with the time, place, person and situation while maintaining its chief characteristic of sustainability as righteousness in all circumstances. So the questions that emerge at the end of the discussion, as based on the moral questioning by the women of the *Mahābhārata*, are multiple: What is the ideal way to respond to suffering or difficulties in life? How do we maintain faith in a moral standard when we are faced with challenges and complexities of life? Do we wither with the issues in life or do we challenge them fearlessly? All these questions about living a morally good life/maintaining ethically resonant stances in life have been deeply and reflectively explored in the *Mahābhārata*, which fosters a culture of dialectical inquiry and interrogation amid moral dilemmas.

While exploring the life-enriching and intellectually explicit themes of life and existence, these feminine energies of the *Mahābhārata* (as discussed in the write-up) are not portrayed as weak. While some scholars with a colonial perspective (Wheeler, 1867-1870; Macdonnell, 1900; Winternitz, 1927) who are unable to assign importance to the minds of the women of the *Mahābhārata* and make use of words that explain their vulnerability and helplessness—they often fail to grasp the deeper structure of the text which is fundamentally women-centric. Women are not subdued in the *Mahābhārata* and its closer study reveals that the women embrace liberality and freedom, while following the path of *dharma* as well as stand as inspiration for most men. This framework guides us towards adopting a strong yet rational approach to confronting the moral shortcomings in the *Mahābhārata* tradition and understanding their context rather than just dismissing them altogether. The reflective study in the article also highlights the true strength of women in ancient India which can be a beacon of light for modern India, where diligent efforts are made to decolonise the very interpretation of the *Itihāsa*. The research further demonstrates how the women of the *Mahābhārata* transform personal suffering into rational resistance by using their voices to ignite social changes, shift mindsets to righteousness, and prepare society for future growth and advancement. The *Mahābhārata* does not stop at human errors. In earnestness, it prompts its readers to reflect on and reformulate morals for society's betterment, ensuring that what was wronged in this historical text should not be

repeated. Through the interrogations of women as discussed, we witness the enlightening and forward-looking spirit of Bhārata of the past for the Bhārata of the present and the future—a civilisation that values intellectual and moral integrity, brave and courageous actions; and looks ahead towards visionary, futuristic and inclusive human development. Therefore, the *Mahābhārata* stands as a powerful testament to women's empowerment and philosophical growth.

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