

# The Study of Unexplored Women Characters of *The Mahabharata*

Nisha  
Research Scholar  
Department of English  
B.P.S.M.V., KhanpurKalan  
Sonapat (Haryana)

**Abstract:** The Mahabharata is full of amazing characters. Among these characters, women play significant roles in the epic. We are well acquainted with some women characters like Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari but there are many women in the epic which are not well known to the general reader. This chapter is proposed to examine these lesser-known women characters of the epic and their unexplored identities. These women are also important in the epic and they contribute in the epic in their own way.

**Key Words:** Unexplored, neglected, personality, Individuality.

**Introduction:** Indian women have always been considered the icon of *Shakti* which comprises the source of life and energy. *The Mahabharata* represents outstanding women who exhibit prominent features of feminism that empower them to overcome their sidelined status. Draupadi, Gandhari, Kunti are portrayed as the leading women characters of the epic; but there are some women who play the significant roles but these women are not well -explored and encouraged. such as Ganga, Uttara, Madri, Sudeshna, Subhadra, Ulupi, Chitrangada and Hidimba.

In fact, they have been neglected by scholars as well as by readers.

The character of Ganga in *The Mahabharata* shows immense courage and strong individuality. She faces some unavoidable situations with her courage and determination. As stated in *The Mahabharata's* story, there was a king named Mahabhisha of the Ikshvaku race. He did good works and held many Asvamedha ceremonies; that is why he earned a place in heaven. But one day his passionate eyes for Ganga brought a curse upon him that only after taking birth on earth will he again be able to enter into heaven. Meanwhile, on her way, Ganga met eight vasus who had been cursed as they had disturbed Vasishtha in his *sandhya pooja*. They requested her to go to the earth and beget them. Ganga agreed to their request. Then they requested further, "O river, thyself becoming a human female make us the Vasus, thy children. O amiable one, we are unwilling to enter the womb of any human female" (Ganguli Adi Parva 96.207). She asked them to choose a man as their father and they chose the best king Pratipa. So, when one day king Pratipa was busy in his prayers, Ganga came and sat on his thigh and requested him to accept her as his wife. He argued and reasoned that he could not

accept her as his beloved or wife. She sat on that thigh which was reserved for his daughters and daughter-in-law and said that he could accept her as his daughter-in-law.

Ganga was determined to achieve her motive. Neither she lost her temper on being rejected by king Pratipa nor she did lose the hope for redemption of Vasus. Very artfully she got the promise from the king for being his daughter-in-law and also cleared her way for her future activities. When Shantanu got of a marriageable age, one day his father Pratipa told him about Ganga and his promise. He commanded his son to accept Ganga as his wife and never “judge propriety or impropriety of her action”; then he retired to the forest. King Shantanu was a brave and handsome king. One day when he was in the forest for hunting, he saw the beautiful Ganga and got attracted towards her. She approached him and told him about her condition to marry him that he would never ask any question related to her actions. The king agreed to her conditions. They lived happily for years. During these years she gave birth to eight sons of celestial effulgence but soon after birth, she threw away every newly-born baby in the water of Ganga. Shantanu could not ask anything due to his promise to her but when the eighth child was born he could not control his curiosity and asked her about the act. She described the whole incident to Shantanu, “There is no woman also on earth except one like me, a celestial of the human form, to become their mother. I assumed a human form to bring them forth.” (GanguliAdiParva98.210). After telling all this to Shantanu, Ganga took her last infant with her and disappeared from there. King Shantanu was generous, virtuous, and protector of all. He did not love or marry any other women for years. Once he went to the banks of Ganga; Ganga appeared there and introduced their son to Shantanu. This son came to be known as Bhishma. Thus commanded by Ganga, Shantanu took his child resembling the Sun himself in glory, and returned; after that, she disappeared. Though she left her son she always remained conscious for his safety. When Parshuram called Bhishma for war, she came into a bodily form to stop them. But they did not listen to her advice. Thus she became the charioteer to help her son. After some time, Bhishma took the reins from her and sent her back.

Ganga again became the rescuer of her son when Amba started her penance on the banks of the Yamuna to mortify her body for twelve years by extraordinary penance. Seeing her penance, Ganga became worried for her son and cursed Amba to become a river in the next birth which will contain water only during the rains. When the war of *The Mahabharata* ended and Bhishma was lying on the bed, badly wounded, Ganga sent some swans in the form of swans of the Manaslake, for him.

The character of Madri appeared for a short period in the epic. She was the second wife of Pandu. When Pandu left to the forest to live a life of austerity, she also accompanied him with Kunti. Her beauty became the reason of Pandu's death as unable to control his feelings, he tried to be intimate with her and triggers the curse given by the sage that if he ever tried to be intimate with any of his wives he will have to lose his life. When

Kunti used her boon to get the sons, Madri was also got jealous and asks Pandu to give her that boon as well so that she could also give birth to children. She gave birth to Nakula and Sahadeva. She practiced 'Sati', "... the daughter of the king of Madras, the wedded wife of Pandu, ascended the funeral pyre of her lord, that bull among men" (GanguliAdiParva 125.263). She gave the responsibility of her sons to Kunti.

Ulupi was a *Naga* princess. She got married to Arjuna. She was the daughter of the serpent king who ruled the underwater kingdom of snakes in Ganga river. Once, Arjuna was forced to break the rule of privacy among Pandavas and Draupadi. So, he had gone into exile. During this exile period, Arjuna met Ulupi. She was impressed by Arjuna and took him to her underwater world. She convinced Arjuna to marry her; a son named 'Iravan' was born to them. She was a good warrior too. She taught the art of warfare to 'Babhravahana' (her step-son). When Pandavas performed 'Ashvamedha' Babhravahana stopped the sacrificial horse when it entered his territory. A battle took place between Arjuna and Babhravahana. Babhravahana's arrow hit Arjuna and he fell unconscious. When Ulupi came to know about this, she rushed to the spot and saved Arjuna's life by her special life-saving knowledge.

Chitrangada was the princess of Manipura and she was so beautiful that Arjuna fell in love with her at first sight. He approached the king and shared his intention of marrying her. Chitravahana told Arjuna about his ancestor, king Prabhanjana. He was childless, so he went through harsh ascetic penances to obtain a child. Lord Shiva was pleased and granted him the boon of only one child. Lord Shiva also said that not only him, but the successive descendants of his race would also have only one child. Since then, only one child was born to every successive generation and had all a son each. But Chitravahana only has a daughter whom he looked upon as a son. Therefore, it was his daughter Chitrangada's duty to carry her father's name forward. Arjuna accepted his condition and married Chitrangada. He stayed with her for sometime, then left her and continued his traveling. He only came back when Chitrangada gave birth to their child. He was named Babhravahana. When Chitrangada heard that her husband had been killed by her son Babhravahana and he was also lying wounded on the ground, she became furious and blamed Ulupi for it. She also requested Ulupi to use her special powers to revive their husband.

Another character Subhadra, she was the sister of Krishna. Arjuna fell in love with her and wanted to marry her. He was well aware of the opposition of Balrama so he took the help of Krishna. Arjuna took away Subhadra in his chariot from a temple and married to her. Arjuna lived for one year with Subhadra and spent the remaining one year of exile at Pushkara. After completing twelve years, Arjuna reached Indraprastha. Then he met his brothers with love and respect, after that he went to Draupadi, who was not happy to see Subhadra. Subhadra touched Draupadi's feet and pleaded her to forgive her. Draupadi accepted her happily. In the due course, Subhadra gave birth to a brilliant son, who was named Abhimanyu. He was very dear to Krishna and he

trained Abhimanyu in every field. When the Pandavas left for exile after being defeated in *Dyuta*, Krishna took Subhadra and Abhimanyu along with him to Dwaraka. Subhadra proved to be a good mother for her son as well as for Draupadi's sons. In the war between Kauravas and Pandavas, in the *chakravyuha*, Abhimanyu fought bravely but had been killed by Kauravas. Grief-stricken Subhadra tried to console her daughter-in-law Uttara. When Uttara gave birth to a still boy, Subhadra requested to Krishna to show his magic and give him life. After ruling for many years, Pandavas decided to leave the kingdom and undertook the last journey, desiring religious merit. They handed over the kingdom to Yuyutsu, Dhritarashtra's son born from a *Vaishya* woman. They crowned Abhimanyu's son in their own kingdom and entrusted the child king Vajrato Subhadra. "Thus the meek, modest and emotionally weak Subhadra lived peacefully serving the elders to keep them happy, though she was overcome by grief at her only son's death. But when the need arose, this gentle and noble lady was strong and wise enough to carry the heavy responsibility of governing the kingdom and bring up the child. This shows her strength and wisdom (sic)" (Bhawalkar 349).

When Pandavas spent the one year in concealment, they took shelter in the kingdom of King Virata. Sudeshna was his wife and the queen of Virata. She played the role of a host to the Pandavas and Draupadi in the year of their exile. Pandavas decided to hide their identity and disguised themselves as commoners. She kept Draupadi as her *Sarindhri* and helped her to hide her identity. Her daughter Uttara got married to Arjuna's son Abhimanyu. In the starting, Sudeshna was not interested to marry Uttara with Abhimanyu because she had seen the anger of Draupadi when she took the revenge of her insult by convincing Bheem to kill Kichaka. Uttara also suffered a lot in her life. She lost her husband at the very young age and gave birth to a still son but he had been given life by Krishna.

Hidimba was termed as '*Rakashi*' in the epic. She was married to Bhima in *The Mahabharata*. When Pandavas escaped from *Lakshagriha* and reached a dense forest. They all fell asleep at night because of exhaustion except Bhima who kept a watch. In the same forest lived Hidimba along with her brother Hidimb. Hidimb smelled the human flesh so he ordered his sister Hidimba to tempt the Bhima. When Hidimba saw Bhima and instantly fell in love with him. She transformed herself in the form of a very beautiful lady and approached Bhima. She revealed her true identity to Bhima and told him about her brother's intentions. She proposed to him to marry her but Bhima didn't accept her as his wife. Bhima confronted her demon brother and killed him. Hidimba requested Kunti to allow Bhima to marry her. Seeing her unconditional love Kunti ordered Bhima to marry Hidimba. Bhima agreed on the condition that he would leave Hidimba after she bore a child. Hidimba agreed to this condition and she gave birth to a son named Ghatotkacha. Later in the war, Ghatotkacha also entered in the war on the orders of Bhima and had been killed.

**Conclusion:** However, these women are not considered major women characters but they play their roles in their own significant way. Their appearance shapes many events in the epic and makes them appreciated in the

development of the epic. These women obtained respect by their own exertions. So we can't sideline these women on account of their short roles in the epic. They emerged as the powerful and influential women.

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