



The Queens' Gambit: Women In The Political Chessboard Of Mahabharata

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Abstract:

This research paper examines the political strategies employed by female characters in the great Indian epic Mahabharata. While the epic puts forth a rich tapestry of narratives that extend beyond the heroism and sovereignty of male protagonists and complex characters, the role of women in shaping political dynamics has yet to be explored much.

This research aims to fill this gap by examining the political strategies, female governance, and agency through closely analyzing key characters such as Satyawati, Gandhari, and Kunti. It seeks to understand how women exerted influence and employed strategies to navigate their ways and assert authority within the male-dominated political landscape of ancient India.

This study employs the Qualitative research approach using close textual analysis of retellings of Mahabharata. Drawing on the Narrative theory of Roland Barthes, it explores the storytelling techniques used to convey women's political influence and actions in the Mahabharata. Utilizing Structuralism by Claude-Levi Strauss, the research aims to identify patterns and underlying meaning in the narrative shedding light on the power dynamics. Using an interdisciplinary approach, this research demonstrates how the narrative and structural context shed light on women working as negotiators, decision-makers, and strategists.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Satyawati, Kunti, Gandhari, Political agency, Structuralism, Narrative theory

I. Introduction:

It is said that behind every great man stands a woman, but what if these women were not merely standing but actively participating in the making of great men and a great event too? Such is the story of female characters in the epic Mahabharata where every woman has been a part of a gambit, making moves on the political chessboard ruling their destiny. Within the pages of Mahabharata, women have been more than spectators, they have been architects of destiny, strategists, and influencers for their fathers, husbands, and

sons. This study focuses on the three most influential women who played a significant role in shaping the narrative and destiny of the characters using their strategic intelligence, political insights, and willingness to be bearers of sacrifices for the greater good. While Draupadi is renowned as the central catalyst for the Mahabharata war, there are three other influential characters named, Satyawati, Kunti, and Gandhari whose importance can't be overlooked while trying to comprehend the trajectory of the Mahabharata and its influencing factors. Beyond their portrayal as participants in the unfolding drama of Mahabharata, a deeper analysis reveals a complex network of symbolic meanings and underlying structures that shaped their actions. This is where Claude Levi-Strauss' Structuralism becomes important and helps us to understand the complexity of their agency and influence from a unique perspective. By analyzing the narrative structures, symbolic motifs, and binary oppositions within the Mahabharata, it becomes easier to uncover the deeper meanings embedded within the actions. In addition, Narrative Theory puts forth another valuable perspective by focusing on the storytelling methods and narrative devices employed in the Mahabharata to understand their roles and actions going beyond the simplistic representation.

This paper employs a multifaceted analytical approach to investigate the complex role of women in the Mahabharata using literary analysis, narratology, and structuralism. It examines strategic maneuvers, power dynamics, and societal expectations shaping women's lives in the epic. The primary analysis includes close readings of Mahabharata by C. Rajagopalachari and The Women of the Mahabharata by Chaturvedi Badrinath. Through a close reading of the texts, this study will delve into the portrayal of female characters, their interactions with other individuals, and their contributions to the political landscape of the epic. Complementary secondary sources include The Curse of Gandhari by Aditi Banerjee, The Fisher Queen's Dynasty by Kavita Kane, The Place of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and The Kaunteyas by Madhavi S. Mahadevan. This research aims to contribute to scholarly discussions on gender, power, and agency in ancient Indian literature and political thought.

This dissertation seeks to answer the following research questions:

- How does the application of structuralism enhance our understanding of the power dynamics and alliances among female characters in the Mahabharata?
- In what ways does narratology theory contribute to uncovering the narrative strategies employed to convey the agency and influence of women in the Mahabharata?
- What thematic concerns and recurring motifs within the narrative serve to empower or disempower female characters in the Mahabharata?
- To what extent do feminist perspectives challenge or complement structuralist and narratological analyses of female agency and influence in the Mahabharata?

Literature Review

The Mahabharata, a cornerstone of Hindu mythology, has increasingly drawn scholarly attention to the portrayal and dynamics of women, particularly in roles of motherhood. Contemporary scholarship, marked by thematic evolution, has shifted towards more nuanced examinations, particularly within feminist literary perspectives. A turning point in this evolution is observed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's work, *The Palace of Illusions*. This novel, offering a reinterpretation of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective, broadens the discourse by presenting a unique lens through which to view women's roles in the epic.

In his work, *The Mahabharata: A Reading in Political Structuring*, Prafulla Kumar Mohanty discussed the socio-political order and administrating property in Mahabharata while discussing the hierarchy of social order. Brian Black's essay in *Eavesdropping on the Epic: Female Listeners in the Mahabharata* highlights the often-overlooked role of female listeners in the Mahabharata. He argues that the act of listening is not passive but dynamic and underscores the agency and intelligence of women in influencing the epic's events. Garima Sharma's research applies modern narratology to dissect the narrative structures of the Mahabharata. Through this lens, Sharma reveals nuanced insights into how female perspectives and agency are conveyed within the epic's storytelling techniques in *The Mahabharata: A Study in the Light of Modern Narratology*.

Structuralist ideas help uncover symbolic meanings and narrative structures in the Mahabharata, enhancing our understanding of its gender dynamics. Despite extensive research, women's political agency and strategic actions remain obscure, highlighting a need for further study.

1. Sovereignty in Narrative: Investigating the Political Agency of Gandhari, Kunti, and Satyawati in the Mahabharata

Italian author Italo Calvino (1923) aptly observed that classics are never simply read but continually re-read. We always re-encounter classics through different channels and delve into timeless narratives, uncovering fresh perspectives and insights. As we stand at the threshold of Mahabharata, we are confronted with the various interwoven narratives of courage and deceit of mortals and immortals that echo through the ages. Exploring the multitude of interpretations and perspectives allows us to unveil the hidden meanings embedded within monologues, dialogues, plots, and strategies. The Mahabharata unfolds as a dialogue between Ugrasravas Sauti and the sage Saunaka, with sage Vaisampayana serving as the omniscient narrator recounting the epic to King Janamejaya of the Kuru lineage. These narratives are fluid, and subject to change over time, reflecting shifts in themes and characterizations from differing perspectives.

Women who are often perceived as operating behind the scenes are frequently overlooked, but they step into the spotlight when they become the narrators. Kunti, Gandhari, and Satyawati emerge as some of the most influential figures in the narrative. Apart from their roles as mothers and wives, they are independent characters wielding significant influence not only over the lives of their husbands and sons but also in shaping the political landscape. Satyawati, Kunti, and Gandhari appear to share a common thread of fate. Satyawati,

known as "Matasyagandha" due to her fish-like scent, was born of a fish's womb, her dark complexion earning her the name "Kali." While her brother was accepted by their biological father, King Vasu and she was given away to Dasharaja, the ferryman. Similarly, Kunti, formerly known as Pritha, was promised to King Kuntibhoja by her biological father, Sura, while Gandhari was promised to the blind king Dhritarashtra. Initially lacking control over their destinies, these characters' desires for power may have originated from their perceived lack of agency.

Satyavati, a pivotal figure in the Mahabharata, requires more attention as her character is unfolded. Applying Tzvetan Todorov's (1939) Structuralist Narrative Theory to Satyavati's narrative elucidates her pivotal role as the catalyst and reveals how her actions serve as structural markers for the unfolding events within the Mahabharata. Despite being given away by the royal king Vasu and left in the care of a fisherman, she visualized a prosperous life. Her legend, written in the Devi Bhagavata Purana, reveals her resourcefulness. In *The Curse of Gandhari*, she recounts how she benefited from the situation when her beauty caught the eye of Rishi Parashara and he demanded her to "accept his embraces", she had ensured that her virginity would remain intact ensuring purity, and she had also asked for a wonderful scent. She had a son born from the wedlock, Krishna Dvaipayana, also known as Ved Vyasa. Her boon of sweet-scent spellbound King Shantanu which she saw as a chance of being the "Queen" of Hastinapur and hence asked the king to marry her. She also demanded that only her sons inherit his dynasty securing her lineage with a prosperous life too. This event serves as a narrative device that aligns with Gérard Genette's (1930) theory of flashbacks which not only adds depth to her character but also foreshadows her eventual success, showcasing her resourcefulness and ambition. Though her union with Shantanu elevated her to queenly status, societal perception branded her as an "opportunist" and she was given the name of "Daseyi: the servant-queen" but that didn't stop her from "proving herself to be an astute woman." People were not ready to accept her because an "unacknowledged orphan had forced the world to acknowledge her as a queen" (Kane 131). She was aware of the immoral choices she had made to pave way her way in the castle but recognizing inherent power dynamics she thinks "virtue was a quality invented by men to suit their needs. If men could use women, why couldn't it be the other way round?" (Kane 138). In *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty*, her conversation with Shantanu reveals her practical side; she understood that without marriage, she risked being reduced to a mere "whore." To secure her lineage and position, she ensured her son's rightful inheritance, which prompted Devavrata to take the celibacy vow.

Kunti, formerly known as Pritha, was promised to King Kuntibhoja by her biological father Sura, illustrating the limited agency given to women in such arrangements. This union was not based on familial ties but rather on political considerations. Kunti "was endued with beauty and every accomplishment and also devoted to virtue and possesses every good quality" (Ganguli/Aadi Parva). Her marriage to Pandu "was also one of political convenience" (Divakaruni 64) which she wasn't happy about as Pandu had taken a second wife too soon after his first marriage. She lamented her father's decision to give her away at a young age saying that "as a spendthrift squanders his money unthinking, so did my father give me away when yet a girl

to his friend (Karve 25). However, the death of her husband and the subsequent responsibility of raising her five sons marked a transformative shift in Kunti's character. Kunti was in the forest with her sons during the Vanaprastha when she took on the task of maintaining unity among them and forging alliances with other influential kingdoms to safeguard the Pandavas' rightful inheritance upon their return. Her determination to ensure her son's rightful place made her a pivotal figure in the domestic sphere, and the Pandavas always paid heed to her.

Kunti is often portrayed as a submissive figure, following her husband obediently, but the modern retellings offer a glimpse of her feisty nature. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi perceives Kunti through a different lens, describing her as a shrewd and strategic woman who navigates life with calculated decisions. When Arjuna marries Draupadi, Kunti's command to divide "the thing" equally among her sons highlights her assertiveness and unwavering commitment to her promises. This act is often seen as a mistake on Kunti's part but Draupadi here sees it as a strategy of Kunti trying to keep her sons united. She says,

"All through my life — even in the hardest of times — everything I said, I made sure it was done. I told myself I'd bring you up as princes in the halls of your forefathers, and no matter how much harassment I faced, I held on to my promise. Sons, if you value what I did for you, you must now honor my word. All five of you must marry this woman...A woman like her would never tolerate anyone who might lure her sons away." (Divakaruni 108).

Through this monologue, we can sense the underlying tension Kunti felt at the thought of her sons being diverted from the real cause exemplifying the notion of Ronald Barthes (1915) that monologues assert individual perspectives and desires enriching our understanding of complexity. Kunti's conscious decision not to retract her words, even after realizing the implications, suggests a calculated move to maintain influence within the family dynamics. In *The Mahabharata* of Vyasa, The contrast between Vaisampayana's narration of Karna's birth, "Kunti cast the handsome child into the water. But the child thus thrown into the water was taken up by the excellent husband of Radha and given by him to his wife to be adopted by her son" (Ganguli 253) and Kunti's first-person narrative in the Udyoga Parva with the use of "I" highlights the depth of emotion and internal conflict Kunti experiences as she grapples with the decision to abandon Karna which is not seen in the third person narrative. In Kunti's narrative, we are granted intimate insight into her motivations and the emotional turmoil she endures, a perspective obscured by the omniscient narrator's distant portrayal of events.

The Writing style of the book *The Curse of Gandhari* is unique as she is facing death and traveling back in her memory where she and the reader both go through the mistakes made by her again and think about what life could have been if she hadn't done what she did. Gandhari, the mother of the Kauravas, emerges as a character intricately woven into the political fabric of the epic who has been "reduced from a complex, nuanced woman to the symbol of her blindfold" (Banerjee 5). Unaware of the proposal from the blind king Dhritrashtra, Gandhari initially felt disheartened and could not tolerate the idea of him as her husband but

ultimately agreed to the marriage as a gesture of respect for the esteemed Kuru lineage. By blindfolding herself, she symbolically demonstrated solidarity with her husband, adhering to patriarchal norms while also asserting her own significant influence. According to Helen Coderman (1987), this act of blindfolding represents the fulfillment of a wife's Dharma, signifying her commitment to stand by her husband through all circumstances, be it sickness or health. Gandhari's father had asked her to be a "good wife" and this was her first act as a "good wife." Interpreting Gandhari's blindfold symbolically through Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857) Semiotics reveals its multifaceted meaning. Here, the absence of sight signifies a conscious choice and adherence to societal expectations, offering insights into her agency and negotiated identity within the narrative. She had deprived herself of sight by choice which her husband had been deprived of by fate. When Satyawati remarked on her decision as "nautanki" she answered, "It is part of my pativrata...I am sure this sacrifice of mine will bring blessings for him and the entire family." (Bannerjee 54). The foreshadowing in the dialogue sets the stage for the coming drama questioning if the vow will really be helpful. Where other people regard Gandhari as a "pativrata" from Gandhari's perspective it can be seen how she detested her "weak" husband when she had herself was learning "to mask pain...she refused to wince or cry out" (Bannerjee 51). Gandhari's husband was disabled in his heart, he was always afraid of people plotting against him and was jealous of his brother and this act of him had reduced Gandhari to a mere kitchen worker looking after her child-like husband who trusted his maid more than his wife.

When Pandu was to leave for Vanprastha, she couldn't bring herself to say something as she believed this opened the door of Hastinapur's throne for her and her husband and she could finally be the queen. Gandhari's act of "striking her womb" when she heard "that Kunti had brought forth a son like unto Surya in splendor" (Ganguli 368) points at her uneasiness and she wanted that throne for her elder son and unlike Satyawati and Kunti, Gandhari didn't let go of her first son when she was informed that "he is evil" instead she was more fierce than before with her guards up. This event also sets up the stage for the coming plot where the "evil" son uses the privilege and brings his clan to an end. Even though Gandhari kept her first son unlike Kunti and Satyawati, the outcomes didn't necessarily reflect a favorable decision. These divergent narratives, stemming from similar actions, underscore the complexity of moral evaluation within the narrative. It's the eventual fallout that truly illuminates the consequences of their choices, discouraging premature judgments.

2. The Mythic Framework of Mahabharata: Structuralist Interpretations

The *Mahabharata* is often regarded as a tale that illustrates everything one shouldn't do. Its richness in symbolism suggests that even after numerous readings, some meanings may remain elusive. Every aspect of the epic, including character names, locations, and alliances, is laden with significance. Unraveling these meanings requires careful attention and a deep understanding, enhancing the intrigue and freshness of the epic with each interpretation. This paragraph will be analyzed through Strauss' (1825) structuralism, which seeks to uncover the underlying structures and symbolic meanings within texts.

In the *Mahabharata*, the significance of character names extends beyond mere identification, serving as markers of social status, traits, and destinies. Satyawati's names, "Kali" and "Matsyagandha," are reflective of her marginalized position within society. The association with the fishery community underscores her societal status, while the name "Matsyagandha" emphasizes her unattractiveness due to the fishy odor attached to her body. However, her name transition, from "Matsyagandha" to "Yojanagandha" after receiving a boon from Rishi Parashara, signifies a shift in her social standing. This transition led to her marriage to King Shantanu and her being renamed "Satyawati," symbolizing her elevation to the status of queen. Despite this, she remains deprived of societal acceptance which is reflected in her name "Daseyi," meaning servant, which highlights the position she had in other people's perspectives. Similarly, Kunti's evolution from "Pritha" to "Kunti" mirrors shifts in her social position. Born to Surasena but adopted by Kuntibhoja, her name change reflects a change in familial ties and societal roles. This transformation suggests the easy shift in one's identity and social status within the epic narrative. Gandhari was chosen by Queen Satyawati for her marriage to Dhritrashtra because of her lineage from Gandhara. Like Satyawati and Kunti, her name serves as an indicator of her future role and social standing. Together, these character names offer insights into the complex interplay of fate, social hierarchy, and individual agency within the *Mahabharata* narrative.

Analyzing the actions and agency of female characters like Kunti, Satyawati, and Gandhari through the lens of Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1864) Structuralism uncovers the intricate interplay of binary oppositions such as Dharma and Adharma. This examination highlights the underlying structural forces at play within the narrative, shaping their decisions and trajectories. Satyawati's adherence to her dharma of protecting her lineage is a central theme, yet her actions, such as compelling her daughters-in-law to undergo Niyoga and leading Devavrat to take the celibacy vow, blur the lines between Dharma and Adharma. These actions can be seen as manifestations of the tension between individual desires and societal expectations within the structure of the royal household. Satyawati's act of giving her son away to his father made her realize that she had replicated the same action that her own royal father had inflicted upon her. Despite Satyawati's acknowledgment that she could not fulfill the role of a mother to Bhisma as unlike a mother "she had taken everything from him...and she felt guilty for stealing the throne from him" (Kane 146) she found herself constrained to this path if she wished to remain in power. Similarly, Kunti's dilemma during the Lakshagraha incident highlights the conflict between self-defense and moral integrity. While her decision to sacrifice another family to save her own sons can be interpreted as an act of self-defense, it was also a selfish decision on her part. Kunti's decision to leave Karna cannot be simply categorized as wholly righteous or unrighteous. Pressured by societal expectations, she felt compelled to adhere to her duty and let go of her first son, following her "dharma." However, viewed from the perspective of a mother, it appears as though she had abandoned her child.

The structuralist analysis also sheds light on Gandhari's role in the narrative, particularly during Draupadi's disrobing episode. Gandhari, though present in the court during the humiliating scene, remained silent about Draupadi's plight. However, she intervened only when Draupadi was about to curse the Kuru lineage, taking a stand and asking Dhritrashtra to speak. Even though Gandhari agreed with Draupadi's words, she remained silent as the voice inside her said "She is not your daughter. She is now your son's enemy. One's victory shall be the other's ruin" (Bannerjee 179) implying that not only men but sometimes women also oppressed other women in patriarchy. Gandhari's plea to Draupadi not to curse her sons can be interpreted as an act of maternal concern, displaying a softer, nurturing side. Here, Gandhari shows the struggle for autonomy navigating between loyalty to her sons and a sense of justice. Their ambitions to secure their lineage came in contrast with righteousness many times.

According to Strauss (1864), symbols are not arbitrary but are instead deeply rooted in cultural norms, social relationships, and collective beliefs. *Mahabharata* is filled with instances of divine interventions, wherein symbols such as boons, vows, and promises assume profound significance, transcending their surface meanings. Boons and vows emerge as recurring symbols throughout the narrative, serving as markers that reflect societal norms and exert influence over the characters. Satyawati's boon of virginity and pleasant odor, for instance, extends beyond personal attributes to signify societal expectations regarding purity and desirability in a prospective bride. Similarly, Kunti's boon of bearing sons highlights the societal expectation for women to produce male heirs capable of inheriting thrones and perpetuating lineages. Moreover, Gandhari's renowned boon of bearing a hundred sons, bestowed by Lord Shiva, exemplifies the strategic considerations underlying Bhishma and Satyawati's selection of her as Dhritrashtra's wife, indicating the broader social and political dynamics at play within the epic.

Satyavati's marriage to Shantanu didn't end happily. He told Satyawati that he "would rather die than live with what I have to...you. Oh I wish I had never met you!" (Kane 167). Shantanu knew he had been mesmerized by her outer beauty and his resentment towards her persisted until his last moments, a sentiment not reciprocated by Satyawati, who remained unapologetic about her action saying that "you prefer blaming me for your foolishness, your guilt" (Kane 167). Similarly, Kunti's boon from the god Surya led to an innocent mistake when she bore Karna. The abandonment and mistreatment of Karna by society made him bitter. Upon learning the truth from Kunti herself, Karna broke down realizing that he had his mother all along in front of him but not with him. Karna's tragic fate unfolded without him ever knowing his true lineage until his demise. Likewise, Gandhari's boon of bearing 100 sons elevated her status, yet their collective loss in the war left her bereft. These instances underscore the paradoxical outcomes of divine boons, often culminating in sorrow and remorse rather than fulfillment.

Furthermore, vows play a pivotal role in shaping character destinies within the epic. Kunti was known for being “rigid of her vows” while Gandhari is renowned for her vow to blindfold herself. While Gandhari's vow garnered widespread respect, symbolizing her unwavering devotion, it didn't add anything to her identity highlighting the tough decision she had made. Devavrat's vow transformed him into Bhisma, earning him the boon of "ichha-mrityu" from his father but Gandhari remained Gandhari. The stark contrast in societal perceptions of male and female vows is evident, with male sacrifices often celebrated while Gandhari's adherence to her vow is seen as mere obligation or spite. She figures that “for a woman to do something so extraordinary was just an attestation of the powers of womanhood” (Banerjee 41). This disparity highlights the structural bias within the narrative, wherein male sacrifices are praised while female sacrifices are diminished or dismissed.

All three queens, in addition to their royal status, assume roles traditionally associated with both maternal and paternal figures within the epic. They strictly oppose subjecting their sons to the same hardships they endured, prioritizing their welfare above all else. This maternal advocacy is seen through their pursuit of securing the throne for their offspring, even if they have to choose morally questionable means. Kunti, for instance, strategically divides Draupadi among her sons to maintain their unity, while Gandhari allows her son to publicly humiliate Draupadi in the assembly. This recurrent theme of repetition emphasizes the cyclical nature of actions within the narrative, wherein characters repeat the very behaviors they detest.

Satyavati's struggle to assert her queenship against her subjects' resistance emphasizes her determination for power, yet she hesitates to bestow kingship upon Vidura, “he, born of a maid, shall never inherit” (Banerjee 62), despite his evident suitability. Similarly, Kunti harbors resentment towards her father for giving her away to Kuntibhoja due to a promise, yet she lets go of Karna out of societal fear. Gandhari experiences humiliation due to her husband's frailty and yet remains passive during Draupadi's public disgrace, only intervening when Draupadi is on the verge of cursing. This pattern of women perpetuating injustices against fellow women to safeguard their perceived birthright reflects the complex power dynamics at play within the narrative. Examining these events through the Freudian (1856) lens of the unconscious reveals how individuals are frequently compelled by impulses or desires of which they may not be consciously aware. While men dominate the game's center stage, it is these queens who clandestinely strategize their next moves, driven by aspirations of personal gain and preservation. This portrayal underscores the pivotal role of women in shaping the narrative's political landscape, subverting traditional gender roles and challenging patriarchal structures.

3. Conclusion

In examining the political agency exhibited by Saryavati, Kunti, and Gandhari within the narrative framework of the Mahabharata, this dissertation has employed narratological and structuralist perspectives to unravel the complexities inherent in their roles. The study addresses the pivotal research questions posed by exploring the multifaceted nature of power dynamics, moral ambiguity, and gendered agency portrayed through these central female characters. In addressing the research questions, this dissertation demonstrates how structuralism enhances our understanding of the power dynamics and alliances among female characters in the Mahabharata by examining binary oppositions, cultural, mythical, and social structures, and narrative techniques. These elements help uncover the deep-seated cultural norms and societal influences that shape the actions of Satyavati, Kunti, and Gandhari. Secondly, the application of narratology has uncovered the narrative strategies employed to convey the agency and influence of women, highlighting the complex layers of their personal and political lives. This approach has shown how narratological elements like flashbacks, monologues, and first-person narratives are instrumental in revealing these characters' internal and external struggles, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of their roles and decisions. Furthermore, this dissertation has identified thematic concerns and recurring motifs within the narrative that empower and disempower female characters, illustrating the tensions between duty, power, and morality. By integrating feminist perspectives, this study has challenged and complemented structuralist and narratological analyses, offering a more comprehensive view of female agency and influence in the epic. It elucidates the concept of a gambit, as each character reveals her strategic moves at crucial moments, hoping to sway the outcome in her favor. In conclusion, this dissertation has demonstrated the enduring significance of the Mahabharata as a repository of human experience and ethical inquiry, showcasing the resilience, determination, and agency of its female protagonists. Through their actions and decisions, Saryavati, Kunti, and Gandhari emerge as formidable figures whose voices resonate across generations, offering inspiration and insight into the complexities of human nature and the timeless pursuit of justice and morality.

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