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# Shakuntala and Satyawati: Transcending Gender Roles

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Social norms and religious values have been drawn from epics such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, several Puranas and myriad mythologies. Gender roles and rules around sexuality have been derived, regenerated and illustrated to exemplify valour, loyalty and duty. Women are depicted as docile, virtuous, submissive, paragons of patience and sacrifice. They have been made appendages, second fiddle with no significant role or as a woman ensnared in a ploy or a seductress. Simon de Beauvoir says that honour, shame, modesty, decorum, submission and sacrifice are all qualities ingrained into the feminine psyche since childhood. She is conditioned to suppress her voice into submission and silence. She is ordained to be presser and carrier of culture and tradition in patriarchal culture. She says that women in mythologies are the elementary silence of truth. Female characters have not been given the scope to speak in literature because they might expose the unpleasant truth of the society(Beauvoir). Mahabharata is a defining cultural narrative in the construction of feminine and masculine gender roles in ancient India and its telling and retellings have shaped Indian gender and social norms ever since. (Brodbeck)

Mahabharata and Ramayana these epics were written by men in the setting of a patriarchal society. Brahmans pertaining to the upper stratum of the society interpreted them to safeguard their vested interests. Women and shudras were classified to the same category and were debarred from reading and hearing religious scriptures. Therefore gender roles for women were defined by the dominant patriarchy.

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Shakuntala is portrayed in Mahabharata as the illegitimate daughter of Menaka, a courtesan and sage Viswamitra. Deserted by her mother she was raised in the family of her foster father sage Kanva. The story is of a love affair between Shakuntala and King Dushyant, their marriage and the subsequent acknowledgement by the king of the son fathered by him. The epic explicitly narrates how the king got allured by the buxom damsel and her shapely limbs. But, when she went to meet her husband at the palace court after living with her son for six long years, the king was completely oblivious of her entity and existence. She went with her son whom she had conceived out of her Gandharva marriage (one of the eight types of marriages prevalent in Vedic age). Her approach was brimming with optimism. She confronted Dushyant and urged for the consecration of their son in acknowledgement as his heir. (Rustomji)

Dushyant cast a sheep's eye at her and not only disowned his son but also made disparaging remarks about her birth and worth. Shakuntala retorted, arguing with credence and acidity. Never did she shed tears for a moment. Mahabharata portrays her fearless and indomitable even after her humiliation. Neither was she depicted as a coy lass when she mingled with the king before. The author of Mahabharata credits her for being a woman, applying her faculty of independence, condemning her husband for his irrationality and insensitivity. Finally a divine prophecy united her with Dushyant by declaring that the son was his (Thapar). The glances made by a mortified Shakuntala seemed to burn Dushyant. She is conscious of the dignity of virtue and was bold in voicing that a wife was the source of dharma, artha, kama and means of salvation (Shodhganga, Infilibnet). Later when he accepted his wife and stated that the alliance between them was unknown to his subjects and thus his arguments were only to ensure that his subjects do not assume he had a bond with her because she was a woman and had chosen the son for his kingdom. The harsh words used by his wife only professed her love for him (Thapar). This is evident here that this lady was independent, fought alone, undaunted and vocal to assert the right for

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her son. She had elicited a pledge from Dushyant during the course of Gandharva marriage that their son from this union should become the king's successor. She is extremely forthright and therefore obtained an undertaking from the king. Also, it required a lot of fortitude for a woman to live with her offspring who was yet to receive paternal recognition.

Millions of years later Kalidasa wrote the play 'Abhijnanashakuntalam', the version was slightly altered and we find in his portrayal the element of drama. He shows the realm of romance, imminent tragedy and finally happiness. The character was a contrast to the character depicted in the original epic. Kalidasa brought the episode of sage Durvasa, his curse and the signet ring to in aid of his portrayal of Shakuntala as an epitome of a virtuous and righteous woman. She was innocent, meek, submissive and the embodiment of pain and hardship, representing quintessential femininity and Dushyant, an archetypal man. She was pregnant, conscious of the social stigma, in search of her husband and led a sheltered life in the company of her foster parents and close companions. Kalidasa belonged to the Gupta era where the status of women had degenerated owing to deep rooted patriarchy. Therefore a self-reliant woman as depicted in the Mahabharata was transformed into a romantic ideal of upper caste high culture in the play (Thapar).

Another powerful woman portrayed in the same epic is queen Satyawati. She was not born in a royal family, and was the daughter of the chieftain of a fisherman. Her ambition was reflected when she took time to ponder about the proposal of sage Parasara who felt sexually attracted to her (Adi Parva). Without being overpowered she resisted his advances with her wit. She made a solemn appeal of giving her boons. She loathed his beastly ardor and focused his attention towards her repugnant body odour. She wittily secured the boon of a fragrant body and unimpaired virginity because the sage entreated her for sexual proximity (Adi Parva). She impelled the sage to shroud a screen of mist elaborating on how coitus in the wide daylight violates the ethics and results in loss of honour and

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reputation for a man. Being a pragmatic girl she knew that Parashar would not marry her and therefore she could regain her virginity and a son like the sage. Post this incident none of them kindled a romantic hope to meet again and neither had she shown any sign of guilt nor trite emotions. After this union Satyavati gave birth to her son named Ved Vyas, the author of the epic (Bhattacharya). Several years later she married king Shantanu of Hastinapur who had wooed her for matrimony. In the beginning her father was reluctant to give her hand in matrimony but later gave his consent on the condition that the offspring of his daughter, born from this wedding should be the approved successor to the throne. The king concurred and Bheesma (the king's son from the previous matrimony) took the oath of celibacy (Ganguly). It is discerned that both Shakuntala and Satyavati married on their terms on being assured that their sons would become the king. Satyavati became the queen and handled the affairs of the kingdom after Shantanu's demise with her step son Bheesma acting as the advisor. She bore two sons from the king but tragedy struck when they died leaving their wives without children. Low caste birth never impeded Satyavati from bringing her son Vyas to the forefront and she commanded him to beget an heir to the throne through the custom of Niyog or levirate. She did not take into consideration Bheesma's plea to wait for a year. It was her independent decision as she felt that a kingdom without a king would be characterized by conflict and disorder. (Bhawalkar)

Devi Bhagvat Purana tells that Vyasa was reluctant to beget sons for the wives of his step brother by pointing out that only at the instance of a husband Niyog was permissible for a widow. Satyavati urged him to do so because she was keen to save the lineage. (Bhattacharya) Thus the Kuru lineage was superseded by Nishad race diffused through the queen and her son.

There are several other instances in Mahabharata alone where the characters challenged and contradicted the expected gender roles. Arjuna, the great warrior prince, cross - dressed and transformed

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himself for a period as a transvestite and taught dance to a princess. The pain of carrying a fetus for a long period propelled Gandhari to deliver artificially showing no concern for the patriarchal injunction (Brodbeck and Black). A glimpse through the pages of Mahabharata will reveal a Brahmanical or upper caste and patriarchal society, where fighting was deemed a trait well suited for the males. (Bhattacharya)

The Mahabharata demonstrates how even the entrenched gender and caste hierarchies of the age of the epics could be challenged by women who displayed the spirit of independence and stood up for their self-esteem. Through their bids to assert the rights of their sons, both Shakuntala and Satyawati exercised the power of their wombs to influence the course of dynastic destinies. In the process, they transcended their roles as mere objects of male lust.

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