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**Narratives of Forgotten Women from the *Mahabharata* in the Postmodern Indian Literature: A Critical Study of Priyanka Bhuyan's *Chronicles of Kuru Woman, a Trilogy***

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**Abstract:**

*Bharata* is a rich reservoir of narratives, and it contains a vast collection of literary works penned down in a variety of genres and languages. Priyanka Bhuyan's trilogy *Krishna's Sister, Duryodhana's Queen* and *Pandu's Other Queen* is the reimagining and reframing of the greatest Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, with the feministic perspective. Mythology has often depicted history in the light of its male protagonists, being penned down mainly by male authors. So, the female characters usually lost their identity and had their stories told by others. In Bhuyan's trilogy, in spite of building the narrative paraphernalia around the male protagonists, the storyline is constituted around the female protagonists. This study explores how the stories and lives of the "forgotten" daughters-in-law of the Kuru dynasty, Subhadra, a younger sister of Lord Krishna and beloved wife of Arjuna; Bhanumati, the wife of Duryodhana; and Madri, the second wife of King Pandu, have been reinterpreted in the contemporary literature. This paper examines Subhadra, Bhanumati and Madri, not only as ordinary and unnoticed female characters of the greatest epic but as the women who made needful sacrifices out of the love and duty in the course of history. This study concentrates on the values of love, devotion, loyalty and self-sacrifice shown by the Kuru daughters-in-law and

tries to listen to the voices that have remained unheard for ages. This study also aims on how these strong female characters, although being an epitome of the femininity, have played a key role during the Third Age of Man, *Dwapara Yuga*. The focus of this research paper is on analysing Bhuyan's trilogy with the metanarrative lens with a view to examining how these characters have been portrayed in the postmodern era by an Indian feminist author.

**Keywords:** Narratives, *Mahabharata*, postmodern, Indian literature, trilogy, retelling, Kuru daughters-in-law, metanarrative.

## **Introduction**

Postmodernism, a philosophical and cultural movement, is a way of thinking that started in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The postmodern era has been marked by a developing skepticism towards the universal truths as well as grand and overarching narratives. It is particularly evident in the concept of metanarrative, a term coined by French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard in the year 1979. Metanarratives often attempt to provide a universal or absolute explanation for a particular aspect of human experience. *The Mahabharata* can be seen as a metanarrative that presents universal truths, reinforces social order and provides a totalizing discourse.

*The Mahabharata*, one of the most sacred epics of India, has been a source of inspiration for the countless literary works of various languages. Whether it be *Panchratra* by Mahakavi Bhasa in Sanskrit that focuses mainly on Pandavas, Duryodhana and *Guru Drona* or a Hindi epic poem *Rashmirathi* by Ramdhari Singh 'Dinkar' that narrates the story of Karna, the literature had always glorified only the male characters of the epic. That is the reason why the narratives of some women of *The Mahabharata* have remained untold and unheard. It was with Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 2008 novel, *The Palace of Illusions*, that Indian authors started emphasizing the female characters of *The Mahabharata*.

According to an Indian feminist novelist, Priyanka Bhuyan, behind the great war of *Mahabharata*, there was the unspoken valour and sacrifices of several women who were rarely spoken of or given proper significance in this Great Saga. This is the reason that she tries to provide a platform for the voices of these forgotten female characters through her trilogy *Chronicles of Kuru Woman* that includes the story of Subhadra in *Krishna's Sister*, the story of Bhanumati in *Duryodhana's Queen* and the story of Madri in *Pandu's Other Queen*. These three female characters offer valuable insights into the complexities of female experiences and the societal expectations that have been placed upon them. This research paper examines Bhuyan's works through a postmodern lens, exploring how her narratives challenge traditional representations and offer a completely new reinterpretation of these characters.

### **Literature Review**

*The Mahabharata* is the longest epic that is replete with a multitude of characters that have their distinct personality, motives and backstories, featuring a wide range of individuals from various social strata, geographical locations and mythological backgrounds. It is the reason that extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to the examination of individual characters within *The Mahabharata*, resulting in various research papers, articles, theses and book-length studies that continue to enrich the understanding of the modern generation of this ancient epic by Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa. Its iconic figures have been the subject of numerous research papers and academic studies, spanning multiple disciplines and theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, the female characters such as Subhadra, Bhanumati and Madri, although playing a significant role in adhering to their duties and being daughters-in-law of a very reputed Kuru clan, lost their voices and significance somewhere in the pages of history. Hence, the aim of this research paper is to uncover the hidden and neglected narratives of these chaste women from *The Mahabharata*.

## **Desire and Pleasure**

Desire and pleasure are the fundamental human experiences and basic human needs which are closely interconnected. Desire is an intense feeling or emotion which directs an individual to pursue or attain something, while pleasure is an emotional sensation that arises from the satisfaction of something enjoyable.

In *Krishna's Sister*, Subhadra's desire to marry the man of her choice, Arjuna, is clearly expressed and it finally turned into pleasure when her brother, Krishna, himself arranged an elopement of her with him, the first ever incident in which a woman was abducting a man! Then after the few years of their marriage, the pleasure got doubled when Subhadra gave birth to a son, Abhimanyu and there was a prophecy that his bloodline will rule the entire *Bharatvarsh*.

In *Duryodhana's Queen*, Bhanumati firmly stated that she never had intentions of being the wife of such a man who despised and disliked his own family. Bhanumati felt that she was merely an alliance and that Duryodhana would dump her as soon as he would get another wife to build his power. However, Duryodhana promised her that he would never marry again and eventually Bhanumati fell in love with him as Duryodhana finally won her heart. This provided an immense pleasure to her and it felt complete when she gave birth to twins after few years, a son named Lakshmana Kumara and a daughter named Lakshmana.

In *Pandu's Other Queen*, the fulfillment of her desires of getting married to the man of her choice gave Madri an immense pleasure and happiness. She said, "I felt a sense of joy and accomplishment in achieving my dream. I am a Kuru Queen at last!" (Bhuyan 23).

## **A Soft Corner**

When it comes to female characters, they have always been portrayed as figures full of love, care, concern, compassion, empathy, selflessness and nurturing. They always hold a soft corner inside themselves that always remains alive, no matter what.

In *Krishna's Sister*, when Subhadra got the news of the humiliation of Draupadi in the *Sabha*, tears welled up in her eyes as she recalled Draupadi's forewarning that it had always been a woman who had paid for man's sins. Then she went to console Draupadi in her room and said, "I know your husbands have deceived you but I am still standing with you. For the sake of the entire woman race you need to rise again. You cannot be defeated. Please sister" (Bhuyan 83). After the death of Abhimanyu in the war, Subhadra sobbed against the chest of Krishna and at that moment she did not care about anything else than being a mother.

In *Duryodhana's Queen*, although Bhanumati hated Duryodhana in the beginning, she eventually fell in love with him. Once she came to know from Sage Vedvyasa that Duryodhana was an incarnation of the evil Kali himself, still she always chose to stand by him in all the situations. She was even worried about the thunderstorm that would have been brought by the war on her husband, son and the entire family. When everyone was blaming Duryodhana, she took a stand for him and said, "My husband might have a lot of flaws, but don't forget that he died a brave man's death, a warrior's death. This war was never fair Uncle Vidura, so why blame him entirely?" (Bhuyan 4).

In *Pandu's Other Queen*, when Madri became a Kuru daughter-in-law and came to know about the abduction and *niyoga* performed with Ambika and Ambalika, her mothers-in-law, she got angry at Bhishma, for whom she expressed dislike earlier as well and said, "How can a woman compromise her heart for the sake of progeny? Wasn't it unfair on the part of Kurus and Dharma?" (Bhuyan 22). When Madri came to know that it was due to a boon of bearing 100 sons by the great God Shiva given to Gandhari that the Kurus brought her as a bride for the blind prince Dhritrashtra to secure the future of the dynasty, she reacted, "Alas! Were women no better than cattle?" (Bhuyan 28).

### **Agency and Autonomy**

Agency refers to the capacity to make decisions and take actions by having the power and freedom to choose one's path, pursue goals and shape one's destiny. At the same time, autonomy means the state of being self-governed and independent. One similar ground on which the stories of Subhadra, Bhanumati and Madri is based is that none of them ever wanted to rule the entire kingdom. However, instead they always wanted to win the heart of their husbands and to rule only over it. They were not against marriage but at the same time they did not want to enter into a marriage without love. They wanted to choose their husbands based on their hearts and not on their skills. Also, these Kuru daughters-in-law never wanted to be a pawn in the cruel game of the politics as indulging into matrimonial relations for the sake of expanding the kingdom was a widespread practice during that time.

In *Krishna's Sister*, Subhadra is presented as a well-read, accomplished and brave woman. As soon as she entered in her youth, her father and brothers started planning about arranging a *swayamvar* for her. At that time, there raised a question in Subhadra's mind about how she could love someone whom she would be meeting for the first time in a crowded hall. She firmly told her father Vasudeva that a woman can never be affected by a man's power, position and status all the time. Instead, a woman wants the love and affection of her husband, who treats her like an equal. Subhadra stated: "I can defeat ten men alone in a battlefield. So if I marry, it will be for love and nothing else" (Bhuyan 8). In the same way, in *Duryodhana's Queen*, when there came a time to arrange a *swayamvar* of Bhanumati, she firmly told her parents that she would not marry someone only by a contest. She would choose whoever her heart desires as she was strong enough to defend herself, and she did not need any man to protect her. Also, although she witnessed the women of her dynasty accepting polygamy, she was not ready to share her husband with another woman, however powerful a king or prince he might be. In *Pandu's Other Queen*, Madri envy at not getting to choose a husband of her

choice by arranging a *swayamvar* due to prevailing barter system is openly expressed, but still with the help of her brother, eventually she got to marry a man of her choice.

Thus, through these characters Bhuyan depicts the strong and independent female protagonists who can represent the present day modern women, who choose love and independence over valour and strength of men and who want to be liberated enough to take their important life decisions without them being imposed by anyone else.

### **Courage and Boldness**

Courage is being brave by facing the danger, difficulty or uncertainty that occur in one's life and boldness is about being confident, fearless and ready to face risks no matter what. These female characters, though often overlooked, demonstrate remarkable courage and boldness in the face of adversity, which makes them inspiring and courageous figures in *The Mahabharata*.

In *Krishna's Sister*, Subhadra is portrayed as the one who was guarding her city Dwarka in the absence of her brothers, Krishna and Balrama. One day when her cousin, Sisupala, tried to enter in the city, the guard stopped his chariot. This made Sisupala very angry and by getting down from his chariot, Sisupala kicked the guard. When Sisupala lifted his sword to strike him, the next moment Subhadra was there to defend the guard by stopping the sword of Sisupala. When Sisupala again tried to attack her, Subhadra turned and with a swift action blocked his next blow. She said, "You think women are weak, Shishupala. Today you will see a glimpse of what a woman is all about and by the time we are finished you will be very sorry to have crossed your sword with Krishna's sister" (Bhuyan 19). Bhuyan wrote about Subhadra, "She was merely defending her city and this makes her a worthy princess" (Bhuyan 23). Subhadra was bold enough to fight for her rights and honour when she was newly married to Arjuna and was to meet her co-wife, Draupadi. Subhadra said, "She (Draupadi) has to accept me a queen

of Arjuna, nothing less” (Bhuyan 63). She expressed her fury when she got the news of the gambling of Draupadi in the *Sabha*. She asserted, “My blood boiled with fury, how dare he? And to make matters worse, were the Pandavas dumb? Where did the valour of my husband go?” (Bhuyan 81). When her son, Abhimanyu was immorally killed by the Kauravas, Subhadra was infuriated and she prepared herself to fight against them without thinking about the rules of war. She went to her tent, and put on her warrior garb and unsheathed her sword.

In *Duryodhana's Queen*, Bhanumati is portrayed as a war widow whose husband has been killed brutally and that too in an unjust manner. However, still, she is firm enough not to bow down or take sympathy from the Pandavas. Even before her *swayamvar*, she said, “I am strong enough to defend myself, I don't need a man to protect me!” (Bhuyan 10). When she was forcibly abducted by Duryodhana from her *swayamvar*, she clearly told him that she would rather kill herself than bowing to him as he was a man of no honour and he might win her by force but he would never win her heart. She firmly said, “I am a Kshtriya princess. I will not bow so easily” (Bhuyan 26). When she got to know about the disrobing of Draupadi, she angrily and boldly said,

“I felt ashamed at my husband's deeds but I was more ashamed at the entire Kuru clan. What has gotten into all of them? Were they so spineless to even stop such a heinous crime?” (Bhuyan 126).

When Kauravas and Pandavas were on the verge of the greatest war of that time, Bhanumati blamed Bhishma for his actions and said, “The truth is neither Pandavas nor Kauravas were at fault; you, yourself, are the biggest culprit for leading our clan to destruction” (Bhuyan 189). During the Kurukshetra war, she clearly declared, “If the Pandavas at any point break the rules of war, I will burn the entire battleground with the fury of Sun!” (Bhuyan 199). This shows how Bhanumati, through her entire life, followed that one sentence she always believed in, “However I was a queen and a queen cannot be weak minded” (Bhuyan 195).

In *Pandu's Other Queen*, Madri is portrayed as a skilled horse rider and it was seen when she went as a charioteer of her brother in the war. She herself said, "Horses always drew me close as it was what connected me to my beloved Madra, and there was no better-skilled Queen better in horse riding than me in the entire Bharatvarsh" (Bhuyan 29). When she came to know that Kunti married to a man of her choice, Pandu and managed to be the Queen of the Kurus although not being of the royal blood, she was jealous and at the same time infuriated. She said, "I am a royal princess, born to be queen!" (Bhuyan 13).

Thus, Subhadra, Bhanumati and Madri were bold and brave enough to express their views, not to accept something less than they want and deserve and also, they never hesitated to raise their voice even against the elders or members of their own family when they found something being wrong or evil.

### **Duty and Sacrifice**

The women of the *Mahabharata* never failed to perform their duties and to make sacrifices, no matter at what cost. Thus, the characters of Subhadra, Bhanumati and Madri are portrayed as epitomes of duty and sacrifice.

In *Krishna's Sister*, Subhadra is presented as a dutiful wife and mother who keeps her husband and son above everyone else around. When her husband, Arjuna, was sent into exile along with his brother, she agreed to stay back in Dwarka for the betterment of their son, Abhimanyu. When Subhadra requested Arjuna to let her and Abhimanyu come along him, Arjuna said, "I know I am asking a big sacrifice from you but Queens make sacrifices. History may not remember it but I promise I will never forget" (Bhuyan 88).

In *Duryodhana's Queen*, Bhanumati is shown performing the duty of the wife with all the efficiency. Once she said to Shakuni, "I shall do what is needed even if that means giving

up the only thing I cherish. I cannot see my lord being defeated or his dreams being snatched” (Bhuyan 92).

In *Pandu's Other Queen*, Madri accepts the fate when Pandu got cursed by *Rishi* Kindam. When Pandu decided to retire to the forest and atone for her sins, Madri was not ready to stay back to enjoy the lavishness of the palace but instead wanted to retire to the forest with her husband. Even after the death of Pandu, Madri prepared herself to go on the pyre with her dead husband by sacrificing her life.

## **Conclusion**

Priyanka Bhuyan depicted her female characters not only as a loving daughter, sister, beloved wife, dutiful daughter-in-law and caring mother but also as an individual who possesses different characteristics from that of the traditional portrayal of such characters. They are not meek, timid, hesitant or afraid but the real Warriors and Queens of the Kuru dynasty in an absolute sense. These daughters-in-law always followed their hearts, but never left their rationale behind when it came to take the decisions. Bhuyan herself says that these are the stories of the women who had everything, yet who lost everything and rose when everyone gave up, to lead the empire of *Bharatvarsh* finally. Thus, these three daughters-in-law of the Kuru dynasty, although being full of the characteristics of agency, autonomy, courage, boldness, love, devotion and sacrifice, remained unnoticed over the course of history.

## **Scope for the Further Research**

Further research can be done to explore the representation of other unheard female characters in *The Mahabharata* as well as in other Indian epics and mythological texts. Additionally, a comparative analysis of Bhuyan's works with other postmodernist texts and

also with the works retelling *The Mahabharata* would provide exemplary perspectives into the emerging nature of postmodernist discourse in Indian literature.

### **Limitations**

This research work is confined to postmodern analysis only of Priyanka Bhuyan's trilogy namely *Chronicles of Kuru Woman*. It does not explore other works of Indian literature with the postmodern lens. Further study will provide new perspectives, diverse insights, various comprehensions and a very pervasive understanding of the other forgotten women in *The Mahabharata* as well as characters from other postmodern texts of Indian literature.

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