



## Eternalizing the Arbitrary: A Revisiting of the Panchakanyas of Hindu Mythology through the Lens of Gender Dialectics

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### Abstract

Enough ink has been spilled in arguing over gender, yet gender as an organizing class of social life has its significance in our times. Articulation of gender seems so smooth, and it creeps into our thoughts surreptitiously and acknowledges its presence as natural and granted. Gender classification has established its normative state as we see today, is not a recent development but as old as humans. The ubiquitous nature of gender and its portrayal in mythological characters deserves great attention in the present scenario. The Panchakanyas of Hindu mythology, Ahalya, Kunti, Draupadi, Mandodari, and Tara, the legendary women, need to be overlooked and studied from a gender perspective. This paper enquires into the role of myths in constructing the gender biased social structure and how women are represented in those texts. It also analyzes how these age-old tales still influence women to remain in the world of subjugation and subjective operation even in the modern world. In addition, this paper highlights the fantasy tales of the Panchakanyas as a means for the women to remain pure and to keep their 'femininity' in the world of men.

**Keywords:** gender, mythology, narration, gender dialectics, feminism, patriarchy, domination.



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## Introduction

### The Story Never Ends

India, as its constitution defines, is a secular country, giving its citizens the right to choose their religion. Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism are the major religions that people of India mainly follow. 'Unity in diversity' is the core idea that harmonizes these different paths leading to self-realization without many conflicts. Though India is a secular country, the nation's majority considers religion as very important in their lives. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2021 states that more than 3 in 4 Indian Muslims subscribe to the Hindu concept of karma, for example. A third of India's Christians believe in the purifying properties of the Ganges River, and nearly 1 in 5 Jains and Sikhs celebrate Christmas (O'Reilly, 2022). Such is the surprising fact about India's model of pluralism and its religious tolerance that is well accepted and admired by the whole world.

At this time, one thing among many other things to be highlighted in the report "Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation" conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2021 is that the religious concepts of one religion are accepted and followed by the other without any compulsion (Neha Sahgal et al., 2021). Hinduism, as the major religious sect in the state with 81% as per the 2011 census, holds an upper hand and plays a pivotal role in disseminating its religious beliefs in the country for many centuries. The religious scriptures, particularly the great epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, and many abridged and adapted versions in the form of children's stories, devotional songs, television serials, and films, have influenced the general public and their interconnected religious beliefs. For instance, during the celebration of Navaratri, especially in the southern states of India, students, farmers, and other workers, irrespective of their religious faith, adhere to the Hindu practice of submitting their textbooks, work-related equipment, and materials as a form of worship to get blessed with knowledge, strength, and wisdom. In such a way, the people of India, regardless of their religious beliefs, are very deeply touched by the grand narratives, especially the centuries-old the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The stories and the myths pertaining to the Kauravas and Pandavas, Rama and Ravana, still remain as powerful tools to construct rules and norms in society. They are not just religious texts but the linchpin in defining the social structure. They simultaneously acted their role in designing various functions of men and women in society by modeling the characters from those epics. The followers of the myths, the Brahmanas especially, made sure that no change or alteration should be required in defining the gender roles in Indian society. Even in the modern day, India predominantly relies on the traditional and mythical narratives for the smooth functioning of its societal structures. And myths, as the basic constituent and promoter of the gender division, as in the above-mentioned religious scriptures, still play their role with no obstruction.

Myths are universal. Every society is built upon certain myths- a story/stories which have happened in the previous age. Most of the stories center on some gods, supernatural

beings like nymphs, or about great warriors of a particular clan or tribe. Myths also tell us how the human race was created, about the water bodies, and the natural phenomena like thunder, stars, the moon, and many other natural events. While fulfilling the form of storytelling, myths are also elevated into the status of sacred tales, cultural traits, and religious beliefs that become an integral part of those societies, and people pay respect and silently accept them as their manifesto. Nobody dares to challenge these tales as they impart a certain social order.

Early humans feared natural phenomena, the fear of hunger, and wild animals, and they worried about their death, whereas their successors in the later years, with the advent of organized religions, feared the punishments from gods for their bad deeds and kept themselves good, hoping for better rewards after their death. Albert Einstein (1954) had called this 'a religion of fear'(p.36). As time moved, the stability of all religious faiths centered on the mediative positions that the priesthood maintained, thus evolving the notion of hierarchy; the Brahmanical sect became the ultimate executors of power. They represented the 'whole' by giving voice to the 'part', in other words, silencing the less privileged and working for the benefit of the priestly caste through which they became performers of social and political power in the society.

Myth, as a medium for the execution of patriarchal power, established its space regardless of languages, geographical distances, and the diversity of the people all around the world. Astonishingly, all myths are patriarchal, and all the characters were given voice by men. Eve, Sita, Kunti, Penelope, and Helen, as examples, were all the inventions of men; their weaknesses and beauty were gifted by men. In the Biblical tradition, Eve is created after Adam. "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (The New International Version, 2011, Gen.2: 18) which designate her as 'secondary', depicting her as the reason for the fall of man makes her morally weaker, and the cause of humanity's sufferings. The New Testament asserts male authority and female subordination and proves how the patriarchal norms were prevalent in the early ages. "A woman should learn quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet". (The New International Version, 2011, 1 Timothy 2.11:12) In the analysis of the origins of patriarchal system in Hinduism verses from *Manusmṛti* (1886, 9.2-3) states "Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control. Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence," and this will help to reflect how men have shaped women's roles and positions in the social and religious framework. Sita's trials to undergo Agnipariksha to prove her purity and Kunti's familial and social obligations are the best means to prove that these mythological characters are the invention of men to support the male power structure. In the Indian Hindu mythical tradition, Sati was observed as a customary practice that offered women respect both from family and society. and it demonstrated women's unconditional devotion towards and dependence on their men. *Atharvaveda* (1895), a

sacred religious text of Hinduism, depicts the practice of Sati in the verses "Choosing her husband's world, O man, this woman lays herself down beside thy lifeless body. Preserving faithfully the ancient custom. Bestow upon her both wealth and offspring". (18.3.1) Again, in *Mausala Parva* (1883-1896), we can see another story of Sati, how the four wives of Sura mounted the funeral pyre of their husband. "The four wives of that heroic son of Sura ascended the funeral pyre and were consumed with the body of their lord. All of them attained those regions of felicity which were his. The son of Pandu burnt the body of his uncle together with those of four wives of his using diverse kinds of secrets and perfumed woods" (16:7). Women are represented by their gender roles by the great sages Vyasa and Valmiki as truth/kavya perceived by the poet. The women in the epics are known for their unconditional devotion, dependence, loyalty, followers, strong supporters, and helpers to overcome their (men's) emotional and social complications. They are scarifiers, selfless, and keep physical chastity, loyalty to their husbands. Moreover, they are glorified as pure, devoted, and fair. These epic stories shape civilizations, and some have become bedrocks of religious beliefs, too. Sita, one of the Panchakanyas, is portrayed as a devoted wife, though she was doubted by her husband for overhearing gossip, and after proving her chastity and innocence, she walked through the fire ordeal. The Mahabharata outlines another story of Savitri, an epitome of loyalty and devotion to her husband Sathyavan, in the book Vana Parva (1893 – 1896) illustrates the power of women's chastity and how it would save the Pandavas from their miseries. The tale of Anasuya displays selflessness, ideal womanhood, devotion and unwavering celibacy and her advice to Sita in the *Ayodhya Kanda* (2002) "O, virtuous woman! By your words, all that is being renewed. No austerity, other than obedience to one's husband is decreed of a woman" (18.9) illustrates how patriarchy wanted women to be in this world. Penelope from Greek mythology, known for her fidelity towards her husband Odysseus, turned her to the epitome of faithfulness, teaching women how to be loyal to their husbands even in their absence. Repetition of mythological themes can be traced in different parts of the world as it moved or borrowed freely from one society to another, and the myth of the Great Flood is the best example. The Biblical version of the great flood in Genesis predates its existence in other similar tales such as the Epic of Atrahasis, a Babylonian the Epic of Gilgamesh, an ancient Mesopotamian poem; in Greek myth, Zeus destroyed the civilization with a flood; and in Hindu mythology, Manu (the first man) escaped from the flood after getting warned by a fish. In such a way, myths act like a compass that navigates the human psyche to its pointed only single direction, patriarchy.

It is no wonder in observing societies from the early beginnings of human life that the basic element of the society was women and the social structure was based on their status. Anthropological studies state that hunters and gatherers had an egalitarian society in terms of their treatment of their females (Owens,2022, p.57), dating back around 2 million years ago (National Geographic, n.d.). The universal status of men as the dominant sex and women as subordinates (Hammond 1976, Ortner 1996) in those periods continued without any second thoughts till the end of the 18th century, which marked the beginning

of feminist thoughts. The universal acceptance of men as the giver of society and women as the receiver shaped the gender ideologies and determined the gender roles as Ortner's (1996) model of female to nature and male to culture. Nature is always subordinate to culture as women are to men, leaving the traditional societies in the mighty hands of Patriarchy. "Gender ideologies embodied in myths, beliefs, prescriptions for the role of appropriate behavior, and personal statements sometimes contradict each other or are contradicted by the behavior of individuals." (Owen,2022, p. 57)

On the whole, mythology plays a crucial role in culture as well as in institutionalized religions. The rituals and ceremonies support the male but sideline women. A noted example for this is the *Mahabharata*, one of the epics written between the 3rd century BC and to 4th century CE in Sanskrit by sage Vyasa, primarily tells the story of the Kurukshetra war fought between the two princely cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The epic has philosophical and spiritual ingredients needed for the upliftment of human life, which varyingly discuss the Purusharthas or the four goals of life, the stories of Shakunthala, Dhamayanti, Savirti and Sathyavan, Rishyasringan, Bhagavad Gita, and an abbreviated story of *Ramayana*. The text has been divided into eighteen chapters called *Parvas* and 200,000 individual verses, which makes it one of the longest poems ever written. Later studies on the *Mahabharata* elevate its importance in the context of world civilization to that of *the Bible*, *the Quran*, the Greek epics, and often consider it as the fifth Veda. *The Mahabharata* depicts warfare, which is a synonym of dominant masculinity, exclusively gives room for men and not only excludes women but also portrays them as dangerous and pollutants.

### **The Five Perfect Wives**

The Panchakanyas, as the name suggests, are a group of iconic and legendary women in the Hindu mythology, namely Drupati, Tara, Mandodari, Kunti / Sita, and Ahalya. Draupadi and Kunti are from the *Mahabharata*, and the rest are from *Ramayana*. Sita and Kunti are often replaced by the believers. These women are considered the ideal women and modeled as the perfect wives in Hinduism.

'A traditional Sanskrit exhortation runs thus:

*Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara Mandodari tatha /  
Panchakanya svaranityam mahapataka nashaka //*

"Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, Mandodari–

Remembering ever the five virgins destroy the greatest sins.' (Bhattacharya, 2020, p. 3)

Hindu texts teach that the recitation of these names will help the believer to get off the sin that they have committed. Panchakanyas literally translates as girls or maidens, but none of them is a virgin, whereas they are treated as eternal virgins who are born in the Kanya Rashi or the Constellation of Virgo. It is believed that a virgin woman possesses more powers of 'Tapa', and these women, though they are married, have great powers of 'Tapa'. The Panchakanya's power solely rests in their chastity, and their virginity excels them in the most challenging situations. The power of chastity makes them pure, pious,

rightful, and thoughtful. Mythology, as a tool of gender dialectics, teaches women to be the purest and most sincere to their men so that they can overcome any challenging state of affairs. Sita is hailed as the best example for this, as she was unharmed by fire in her test of purity. Ahalya, the most beautiful woman, comes in the Bala Kanda (the book of childhood), the first book in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. She was created by Lord Brahma out of water as the most beautiful woman to break the pride of Urvashi, the Apsara in the court of Lord Indra. She was under the care of sage Gautama until she reached puberty. Being pleased by Gautama's austerity, Lord Brahma gave her to him. "Indra, who always believed that the best women are meant for him" (Bhattacharya, 2000), disliked her marriage to the sage. Bala Kanda states Lord Indra's urge for beautiful women in the verses "Oh, finely limbed lady, indulgers do not watch out for the time to conceive, as such oh, slender, waisted one, I desire copulation with you." (*Valmiki Ramayana*, 2002, 1.48.18) Many stories revolved around Ahalya and Indra, such as he came disguised as Gautama, and in some other stories, she recognized Lord Indra, but out of curiosity, she couldn't get her back. Another tale says that it was Indra's trickery that she couldn't recognize. In all the stories, Ahalya and Lord Indra were cursed by sage Gautama, and Ahalya was saved by Rama as her story was recounted by sage Vishwamitra.

Tara, known for her wise counsel, was once the wife of the monkey king Vali and later married his brother Sugreeva. She was a practitioner of social rules; therefore, she married her husband's brother, thinking her husband was dead in a duel with the demon. Tara saves Sugreeva from the hands of Prince Lakshmana, as he ignored his promise to Lord Rama in saving Sita from King Ravana (Valmiki Ramayan, 2002, p. 4). Tara, a mere follower of the customs set by the age, hails her presence in the myths as well as being counted as a perfect woman to be followed by generations.

Mandodari, a girl rescued from the well by her foster father, Mayasura and was the wife of the asura king Ravana. The *Valmiki Ramayana* portrays Mandodari as a pious and noble woman who was also known for her patience and duty towards her husband. She raised her voice against the injustice that Ravana did to Sita by abducting her from her husband, Rama. Her presence as a loyal wife in Ramayana elevated her into one of the iconic women in Indian mythology.

The Dharma Patni of the Pandavas, Draupadi, is one of the reasons for the Kurukshetra war. She had been insulted by Duryodhana and molested by Dushasana in the epic *Mahabharata* during the game of dice. She was very obedient to her husbands and silently went through the pains. She was an ardent believer in Lord Krishna and was known for her beauty and dark complexion.

Kunti, the foster child of King Kuntibhoja and the mother of the Pandavas and Karna, had undergone many struggles in her life. The catastrophic life rewarded nothing but agonies to Kunti. At the same time, she is known for her bravery in leading her life with her children when they were abandoned by the Kauravas. A thoughtful and reasonable woman of history, her presence is marked by her virtue of constancy and is advised to be modeled by her female descendants.

In the grand narratives such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, women and the female characters are assigned dharma that makes them mere listeners, highlighting a stark gender distinction perpetuated by men. Through each opportunity of narration, the masculine forces were very clear about how to represent their counterparts, leaving a way for no ambiguity. The ancient Babylonian legal code – The Code of Hammurabi (C. 1750 BCE), a historical document, allows men to control their counterparts and grants authority in marriage, property, and family matters. *Manusmriti* (1886), another document, validates the dependency of women towards their men and restricts women's privilege and freedom. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) states, "man represents both positive and neutral... whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity". (p.15) which acknowledges how women were treated as the other throughout history and how men used to oppress their counterparts, as narrated in the canons of literature. The typical gender identity and the dharma that is to be served and associated with women and their portrayal are discussed in the coming sections.

### **Phenomenology or the Eventual Knowledge Claim**

Edmund Husserl, by the end of the nineteenth century, had developed a philosophical thought that defined that everyday practices, typical and habitual encounters that conscious beings confront in their surroundings, are the basis of making new knowledge (The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, 1970). He asserted that our perceptions, hopes, desires, objects we see, and inherited beliefs all contribute to the greater amount of experience that eventually turns into one's knowledge and later the public knowledge. Myths, as one of the constituents of culture formation, through narratives, plant the seeds of values, ethical guidelines, and shape our perceptions, play a significant role in constructing new knowledge, and particularly share the knowledge of gender division in society. "As A. Lovsev emphasizes, myth is not a fiction, fairy tale, but it is a category of our being and consciousness that has its own strict structure and logic" (Vasyl et al., 2018) The impact of imitating the mythical tales in everyday life and their strong imposition on women drastically affected them by portraying them as socially inferior and culturally impure. Furthermore, the interpretive endeavors of great epics will cleanse the sin and will help the reader to attain emancipation (*Mahabharata 1884-1894*). Such encouragement prompted men to rewrite, reimagine, and retell the tale in their own way and placed men as the supreme being, while their counterparts received glorification. But unfortunately, glorifying women is the new strategy that men use to get control and suppress them in the myths. Therefore, the articulation of this new phenomenology paved men to be the masters over their slaves.

The story of the *Mahabharata* had undergone mutation several times in the past several centuries in both written and oral forms. The first book of the epic *Adi Parva*, translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, Ugrasrava surnamed Sauti, narrates the story in the presence of other narrators, which he had heard from sage Vaisampayana, who heard from its original composer, Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa. 'Sauti said, 'Having heard the diverse sacred and

wonderful stories which were composed in his Mahabharata by Krishna-Dwaipayana, and which were recited in full by Vaisampayana' (Mahabharata 1884-1894). In essence, the sacred text which is in circulation today is imperfect and biased, insatiable and unanswerable. Minor plots and characters were given more importance and elevated, and the entire structure is reorganized for the apt delivery of a new literary and political trajectory. As David Shulman (2001) comments on the *Mahabharata* in his book *The Wisdom of Poets: Studies in Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit*:

We are dealing less with a fixed text than with a message couched in a specific poetic idiom and reflecting a specific range of vision and perception... and it produces no convincing synthesis or stable set of answers. Quite contrary: the epic remains, to the very end, an unbalanced, imperfect vehicle for unanswerable questions. (p.25)

Surprisingly, many blindly follow these surpassing tales of Hinduism as true, as the culture has already borrowed and been indebted to them. How does this new knowledge that is not present to us work in the collective consciousness of our present day? Laurie Patton addressed it as imagination "as a series of tropes and figures about which the public has general knowledge and would have basic association" (Kanjilal, 2017, p. 54). The *Mahabharata* stories had made such an impact in creating a gender based social structure in which women are classified as the second sex, and how such phenomenology later became a natural knowledge to the generation that came after.

### **Absolute sex, no less.**

The female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities,' said Aristotle; 'we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.' And St Thomas, for his part, pronounced woman to be an 'imperfect man', an 'incidental' being. This is symbolized in Genesis where Eve is depicted as made from what Bossuet called 'a supernumerary bone' of Adam. (Beauvoir, 1972, p. 15)

Simone de Beauvoir quotes in her book *The Second Sex* how men in history perceived women as living beings. On one hand, she is nothing but the other, a stranger, a weaker as against the stronger male. A woman is considered a mere sexual organism, highlighting her biological traits as a means of reproduction. On the other hand, she is a submissive being on whom the immortal man can execute his likes and dislikes. A mere body and flesh that has no individuality, desires, or personal freedom. She is absolute sex, no less. Pierre Bourdieu (2001) in his *Masculine Domination* states "...the body itself in its biological reality...which constructs the differences between the biological sexes in conformity with the principles of mythic vision of the world rooted in the arbitrary relationship of domination of men over women" (p.11). Kunti, in a scene in the *Mahabharata*, tells her sons to share the gift Draupadi, (thinking it might be some material), brought by Arjuna among them. She was unaware that it was a woman. But later, she is very reluctant to rectify the error and shows that Draupadi was meant to be a sexual object and forced to seek a polyandrous relationship. Legitimizing this polyandry relationship, Krishna gives marital advice to Draupadi through her soliloquy dialogues

with him, as they had a unique relationship. At the same time, her father receives advice from Vyasa. First, Vyasa tells Drupada the divine secret that makes his daughter's polyandry legal - that Draupadi is Sri incarnate and the Pandavas' five former Indras to whom she had already been serially wed. (Brodbeck and Black, 2007, p.111) This polyandry relationship was found in many of our cultures, imitating the mythical tradition. In Kerala, till the mid-20th century, polyandry and polygamy were prevalent in castes such as Nair, Thiyya, Kammalan, and a few of the artisan castes. K. Raman Unni's "Polyandry in Malabar" details the polyandric system followed in Kerala, especially in the Malabar region. Furthermore, a 1993 Malayalam film, *Venkalam*, directed by Bharathan, deals with the issue of Polyandry tradition among the Kammalar community in Kerala. But in every instance, the status of a woman is degraded and devalued, thus demeaning her just as an object. Ahalya is represented as a woman who is another sexual object for Lord Indra, who believed that the most beautiful and best woman is meant for him. This later led to the lustrous relationship with her, and eventually, she was cursed by her husband, sage Gautama. But the gender division, even in the case of punishment, is a surprising one that Ahalya was turned into a stone, and the bliss that she got from her husband was that she would be saved by Rama by touching his feet on the stone where she is living now. Ahalya was cheated by a man, cursed by a man, and saved by another man. Gender dialectics, the oppressions that a woman in myth and that she is not an ordinary woman like Sathyavati, but Ahalya is the daughter of Brahma, had to face the gender discrimination ruled out by the patriarchy. Here, in both incidents 'manliness, the point of honor, deflowering of the bride, abundant male offspring, which are legitimized and expected of a 'real' man, Bhishma, Rama, Indra, all represent the masculine domination and diffusing that knowledge as cultural arbitrariness into the natural.

### **Internalizing the Symbolic Male Dominance**

... as being eternal is merely the product of a labor of externalization performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system... (Bourdieu, 2001, p. vii) The great epics of Hinduism, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, are not just extraordinary tales of wonder and amazement but also an exceptional saga of male dominance. Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika were the three daughters of Kashya, the king of Kashi. Amba was the eldest and most beautiful among them, was in love with King Salva. Bhishma, the most formidable commander of the Kauravas' army, challenged all the suitors in the Swayam Vara of these three daughters of Kashya and defeated all other men and brought them to Hastinapura for his father's son and the young king Vichitravirya. Amba reveals her love towards King Salva to Bhishma, and he allows Amba to leave, but unfortunately, she was rejected by Salva, knowing that she was already owned by Bhishma. All these three princesses were just the victims of male dominance beginning from their father, who declares his daughters will marry whoever may prove themselves as the most valorous man. Bhishma, as a dominating male, never asks for their wish and takes them home as objects. Salva denies his love for

Amba, telling her she is now owned by some other man. Even after Vichitaviryan's death, Bhishma allows Vyasa, another male, to have sexual intercourse with both Ambika and Ambalika without asking their permission to have an heir. Their disgust and dislike of Vyasa give birth to deformed Dhritarashtra and impotent Pandu. Tara, the wife of King Bali, after his suspicious disappearance after the duel with the devil, had to marry his brother Sugreeva. She was neither lustrous nor impure, but the social custom had imposed such a practice on her. She had no other option than following the eternalized structure of society based on gender and sexual division. No woman is free from that, and the above-mentioned women were not just women but were princesses and a queen. In a patriarchal constructed society, women are just objects, as Simone de Beauvoir (1972) states in her introductory section of *The Second Sex*:

A woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave. Michelet writes: 'Woman, the relative being ...' And Benda is most positive in his *Rapport d'Uriel*: 'The body of man makes sense in itself quite apart from that of woman, whereas the latter seems wanting in significance by itself ... Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without a man.' And she is simply what man decrees; thus, she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him, she is sex – absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (p.3)

### **Advocates of Eternal Feminine Theory**

'Tota mulier in utero' — says one [man]. (*The Second Sex*, 1949, p. 2) The *Mahabharata* depicts Kunti as a sacrificing Indian mother. She wouldn't have faced such struggles from her early adulthood if she were not born as a woman and if she were not in that gender role. Gender based responsibilities reached Kunti from her early adulthood and were assigned to serve the sage Durvasa. Later, we see how she was being punished for a gift given by a man. She had undergone the pangs and pains of losing her first son, born in union with the God Surya. But Surya deva was not ready to take up the fault and charged it as it was invited by herself. Therefore, the makers of gender binaries have circulated it as Kunti's fault, and as an extended version, this gives the impression that fault is always committed by women. This new knowledge, by the time it becomes part and parcel of gender definition, and still, women are always alleged as the creators of problems in their families, workplace, and in the general public space. Why are women characters portrayed as tolerant, submissive, and silenced gender in the myths? What is the need to display them as idealized women? Kunti, Sita, Tara, Draupadi, Mandodari, and Ahalya are all represented as perfect and giving an instruction to chant these names to redeem from the sins that women get committed with. Myths and stories of the past are highly designed to suppress women and give them a second place in society. Koral Dasgupta, in her novel *Kunti*, gives voice to the materfamilias in a non-traditional perspective enquiring

how her life was scarred by all those masculine forces in her adolescence, youth, and maturity. In a very imaginative as well as profound state of confusion in the novel, Kunti was confronted with the sea waves, who were looking for her source of energy God Surya, knowing that Kunti had hidden him in her thought, not making him visible to others addresses her as 'a sinful woman' (Dasgupta, 2021, p. 62) but not God Surya. Even the non-living beings, if they get a chance to speak, they too will accuse women as the cause of every problem. It is an insight into the truth of how systematically the society is structured and how prejudiced it is towards women. Women are the victims and the sole survivors.

Kunti is the best example of the eternal feminine theory, that she is just a womb that is meant to give birth to man's children, denying her individuality and trapping her in domestic surroundings. And that environment around her creates pain and suffering, which she silently adores as her fate. As Simone de Beauvoir (1972) rightly states that women misrecognize being a human being for femininity, as she shares in that mysterious and threatened reality. (p.3) Myths and epics, as the proponents of fixed social and biological roles of women keep them away from attaining rationalism and achieving enlightenment through inculcating and making believe that the 'virtues' detailed in those stories as real and imitable to achieve spiritual happiness. In the Indian context, while admitting a ray of hope is seen among women in educating themselves to realize that they are not slaves of men, still, there are a lot of women who even can't identify the shackles of gender discrimination or else silently accept them as just a womb.

### **Conclusion.**

A story in the *Mahabharata* centers on the first man on earth, Vaivasvata Manu, and his wife, Sharadha, as the couple had no child for long years. They performed some yagna. Manu wished to have a son, whereas Sharada cherished a daughter. Meanwhile, she gave birth to a son, and they named him Sud Yumna. One day, the boy with his playmates entered the beautiful forest called Sharavana, the forest of reeds. But as soon as they stepped in, the male gangs turned into beautiful women. That was an enchanted portion owned by Parvati. She said to them, 'No men are allowed to come here. (Murthy,2016, p. 2) Sud Yumna, now Ila, seems lifeless and frightened. So being a woman creates a feeling of fear and shock, and a very disgusting, uncomfortable position among the people. 'That she is being tricked, many men have realized. 'What a misfortune to be a woman! And yet the misfortune, when one is a woman, is at bottom not to comprehend that it is one' says Kierkegaard. (Beauvoir,1972, p.676) Lord Indra, in Koral Dasgupta's (2021) *Kunti* as the epitome of manliness, seeks a relationship with women but considers them as 'women are another face of Maya'. (p.88) He demands selfless love from women, but he won't return the same. The Pancha Kanyas got a space in the great epics because they didn't challenge the patriarchy and the domination of their men. Sita follows Rama to the forest, but Urmila doesn't follow her husband, Lakshmana; therefore, Urmila is not glorified in the epic. Kunti accepted Hidimbi, the rakshasa wife of Bhima, because she accepted the

norms of the royal family. Mandodari always respected her husband, though he had many faults of his own. Chanting the names of the most respected women in the myths rewards great things, and spreading the message in the great epics will emancipate from the sins. Malayalam fiction writers M.T. Vasudevan Nair and P.K. Balakrishnan took a progressive move by giving voice to the silenced women, especially to Kunti and Draupadi, in their notable novels *Randamoozham* and *Ini Njan Urangatte*, respectively. Being men, they addressed those characters on their emotional and psychological struggles, as gender division is nothing but a mere social construction. Simone de Beauvoir (1972) rightly mentioned in her introduction to *The Second Sex*, by quoting the seventeenth-century feminist Poulain de la Barre, put it this way: 'All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit.' (p.4) The traditionally assigned, unjustified, and stereotyped 'weaker sex' position of women creates an invisible formation of submission in them, which recognizes the authority and domination of men. The epics remind and reduce them to their submissive and inferior nature, besides making them unthinkable about the infinite excellencies they possess. Simultaneously, these texts equip them to accept their 'learned helplessness' as a routine. Pierre Bourdieu (2001) rightly quotes in his *Masculine Domination*, 'The more I was treated as a woman, the more woman I became'. (p.62) It is high time for the woman to come out of the unconscious structure of womanhood that man has created from time immemorial.

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