



Between Tradition and Transformation: Examining the Representation of Maternal Subjectivity in the *Mahābhārata*

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Abstract

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This paper delves into the intricate representation of various motherhood(s) within the ancient Indian epic of Mahābhārata, exploring its metaphysical framework and ideological influences that shape its portrayal of maternal figures. Since the theological and metaphysical discourses extend strong influence on the treatment of female sexuality and motherhood within Mahābhārata, this paper aims to present a dialectical analysis of religion, female sexuality and motherhood through a critical interpretation of the narrative and didactic sections of the Mahābhārata. The analysis, informed by Sara Ruddick's concept of maternal thinking, underscores the intellectual dimensions of motherhood within these narratives. Simultaneously, the paper also examines narratives featuring disenfranchised characters like Hidimbā, showcasing instances where women assert their subjectivity through maternal agency, making choices and successfully raising children independently. The paper also analyses the narratives surrounding parturition, fertility, and the maternal obligations, highlighting the conflicts and negotiations the women characters within the narratological schema of Mahābhārata face in balancing their roles as mothers and their adherence to metaphysical norms. By employing a dialectical lens, this paper seeks to unravel the tensions, contradictions, subversion and negotiations that emerge when theological concerns, female sexuality, and motherhood intersect within the Mahābhārata corpus. The paper therefore aims to contribute to the broader discourse on religion and gender by shedding light on the ways in which theological norms and metaphysical themes influenced and in turn were influenced by women's experiences of sexuality and motherhood.

Keywords: Mahābhārata; maternal agency; autonomy; motherhood; subjectivity

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1. Introduction: The Interface Between Religion and *Dharma*

“A mother’s word, after all, is to be respected above that of the highest guru, for a mother supersedes all in authority.”

(*Mahābhārata* I.199.14 qtd. in Dhand 118)

Yudhiṣṭhira employs these words to justify Draupadī’s polyandrous marriage to the five Pāṇḍava brothers. While he also draws upon dharmic scriptures to reinforce his argument, he prioritises his mother’s directive as the primary validation for this unconventional marital arrangement. This prioritisation suggests that, within the *Mahābhārata*’s narrative framework, a mother’s authority may supersede that of preceptors and sacred texts. Nevertheless, the *Mahābhārata* is a profoundly polyphonic text, encompassing a multiplicity of ideological, philosophical, and moral perspectives. This diversity precludes definitive conclusions about the status of mothers based solely on Yudhiṣṭhira’s assertion. Contradictory discourses within the epic may challenge or nuance this position, necessitating a broader and more cautious analysis.

There are numerous scholarly opinions regarding the status of religion within the narrative schema of *Mahābhārata*. While some scholars

believe it to be an inherently theological text, other scholars are firm believers in the secular characteristic of the text. Within the context of *Mahābhārata*, religion should however not be understood as an institutionalised value/belief system, which is a semantic understanding of the word. The term religion is the preferred English translation of the Sanskrit word *dharma*, simply because of the lack of a better alternative. However, in recent scholarship on *Mahābhārata* terms such as righteousness are also frequently used to refer to *dharma*. *Dharma*, not only in *Mahābhārata* but also within the entire corpus of Indian philosophical text refers to the obligations that one must fulfil and these obligations are determined according to one’s gender, *varṇa*, class and occupation. There is no conceptualisation of universal ethics within the theological framework of *Mahābhārata*, rather there exists highly individualised dimensions of ethical obligations which is referred to as *svadharma*, meaning an individual’s own *dharma*. Also, one’s *svadharma* is not a fixed path which is pre-determined at the outset of an individual’s life, rather one of its defining characteristics is its flexibility and malleability. One’s *svadharma* is situational and contextual, implying that the core ethics of *svadharma* are contingent on situations and contexts, and is likely to change as per the situational

and contextual demand. Throughout the *Mahābhārata* it is iterated that ‘the ways of *dharma* are subtle’ in order to emphasise the flexibility and subtlety of the nature of *dharma*.

Mahābhārata is certainly a *dharmic* text, implying that *dharma* i.e., one’s righteous obligation and duties constitutes one of the core concerns of the text. Though explications on *dharma* are scattered throughout the text, yet it is in the *mokṣa dharma* section of Śāntī Parva, which constitutes the largest volume of *Mahābhārata*, could be found the most detailed and analytical exposition of *dharma*. Each and every theme of *Mahābhārata* such as feudal war, property dispute, and human fallibility to cite but a few are entwined within the metaethical discourse of *dharma*. Hence, any attempt at situating the status of mothers and conceptualising the notion of motherhood within *Mahābhārata* requires an analytical navigation through the theological and *dharmic* framework of the text.

2. The Two Branches of *Dharma*: *Pravṛtti* and *Nivṛtti*

Mahābhārata is a testimony of the theological and literary innovativeness of its composers, whose one of the aims was to reaffirm the superiority of Vedic religion and Brahmanical orthodoxy,

which was severely undermined by the wave of socio-economic, cultural and political changes. However, it would be completely erroneous to assume that *Mahābhārata* resorted to polemics or dogmatism to uphold the values of Vedic religion. It is, in fact, an immensely pluralistic text that not only incorporates the value systems of the heterodoxic movements but also places them at a superior position in relation to the values of Brahmanical orthodoxy. Within the narrative framework of *Mahābhārata*, the orthodoxic values are represented through the doctrine of *pravṛtti dharma* and the heterodoxic values, which also included Buddhist spiritual ideology, were assimilated through the doctrine of *nivṛtti dharma*. *Mahābhārata* thus employs the categories of *pravṛtti dharma* and *nivṛtti dharma* to harmoniously assimilate the diversified religious doctrines and practices of classical period in India. In broad terms it can be stated that *pravṛtti dharma* is concerned with the worldly life and regulates the ethics of householders, while *nivṛtti dharma* emphasises on renunciation and detachment from worldly life in order to attain the soteriological goal of *mokṣa*.

In *Mahābhārata*, *nivṛtti dharma* is commended as the *uttamadharma*, meaning ‘the superior or most ideal

religion' that ought to be followed by every enlightened individual who becomes weary of the worldly existence. While the path of *pravṛtti dharma* is followed by ordinary folks, *nivṛtti dharma*, on the other hand is meant for the extraordinary few who not only possess a spiritualistic bent of mind but also have the mental as well as physical resoluteness required to tread the arduous path of *nivṛtti dharma*. Hence, *Mahābhārata* through subtle hierarchization of the two different sets of ideologies displaces the alleged supremacy of Brahmanical orthodoxy by relegating it to a secondary position in relation to *nivṛtti dharma*, which is described in the text as *uttamadharma*, the superior among the two.

3. *Pravṛtti Dharma*: Regulating Sexuality and Procreation

Since *pravṛtti dharma* was concerned with maintaining the foundation of society, therefore regulating and structuring sexual relations were one of its most important aspects. Albeit sex was heavily regulated by the dictums of *pravṛtti dharma* but unlike the ethical discourse of the modern world, sex was definitely not considered as a taboo in Vedic religion. In fact, according to Arti Dhand, sexuality and sexual relations were an important dimension of Vedic philosophy, as is attested by Vatsyāyana's

Kāmasūtra that scholars estimate to be composed within the period ranging between 400 B.C to 300 A.D., which interestingly coincides with the estimated composition period of *Mahābhārata*. Arti Dhand in her book *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata* notes, "The Hindu tradition has a typology of sex that reaches back to its hoary beginnings. Sex was a preoccupation within Vedic religion itself, which dictated when and under what circumstances a couple should be sexually active". (96)

Vedic religion was distinctively ritualistic, with sacrifices forming a major component of its religious doctrine. Since sex was a major preoccupation within the theological framework of Vedic religion, sexual imagery and allusions were incorporated even within the ritualistic structure of Vedic sacrifices. Within the theological framework of Vedic religion, sexual relation between a man and woman was connected to the rhythm of cosmos. Therefore, Vedic religion so closely regulated the sexual relations since the potency and sexual energy of individuals were theologically connected with cosmos, and hence the sexual energy should be channelised through strict regulations towards achieving the greatest good of society. As *pravṛtti dharma* encompasses

the doctrines of Vedic religion, hence within the narrative structure of *Mahābhārata* the elaborate code of sexual ethics is presented within the larger discourse of *pravṛtti dharma*'s metaethical doctrine.

Hierarchisation and categorisation are distinctive features of Vedic religion and consequently of *pravṛtti dharma* as well. Hence, even sex gets hierarchised and categorised into various types, implying that certain types of sexual relations, especially those that are aimed towards achieving greater good for society, are inherently superior than other types. Within the framework of *pravṛtti dharma*, sexual relations and procreation are inextricably intertwined, and the general code of sexual ethics are aimed at optimising the sexual potential of each and every individual. As mentioned earlier, sexual relation was categorized into different kinds and the type of sexual relation that was aimed at achieving greater social good was lauded as the best. The best kind of sexual relation according to *pravṛtti dharma*'s codes of sexual ethics entailed the sexual relation that a couple engaged in with the sole motive of procreation.

Procreation was perceived to be the ultimate motive for engaging in a righteous sexual relation, rather than being driven by

primitive impulses of lust and desire. Throughout the text the supreme importance of procreating offsprings is emphatically reiterated. For instance, in the narrative of Jaratkaru, the *yāyāvārs* admonishes the ascetic ways and celibacy of Jaratkaru in the following words: “Austerities, sacrifices and other sacred and great acts are inferior to obtaining offspring. That is the view of the learned” (*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.5.41). Likewise, in the episode located in Ekachakra where the brāhmaṇa family was required to send one of its members to the *rākṣasa* named Baka, to be devoured by it as was stipulated by the custom of the village, the daughter of the family beseeches her father to send her to the *rākṣasa* in the following words: “A child saves everywhere, in this world and in the next. It is because a child saves everywhere that the learned know a child by the name of *putra*” (*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.10.147). The brāhmaṇa's daughter volunteers to go to the *rākṣasa* because as is suggested by her words, a child is expected to save his/her parents in this world as well in the next. And she, therefore, is merely doing her duty by volunteering to be devoured by the *rākṣasa* instead of letting her parents go.

The above cited narratives underline the importance and necessity of

producing children. The implicit message that could be discerned from the narratives is that procreating progeny is the greatest achievement of an individual's life, in comparison to which even the sternest of austerities and vows fades away. Therefore, *pravṛtti dharma* places immense importance on procreation and constructs the framework of sexual ethics on the fundamental premise of procreation. *Pravṛtti dharma* strictly modulates sexual relations and had laid down an elaborate guideline on the appropriate sexual conduct and relations. Any transgression from the pre-determined set of rules invites severe censure and punishment, especially if women are involved. However, owing to the great importance placed on procreation within the framework of *pravṛtti dharma*, women's sexual transgressions are also forgiven or at least tolerated if the sexual union was motivated by or results in children.

Pravṛtti dharma even endows women with the authority of selecting a partner for herself if her family is neglecting their responsibility of finding an appropriate match for her, even after three years had elapsed since her puberty. Such exceptions are made keeping in mind the supreme importance accorded to procreation, in order to ensure that a woman's procreative potential is not

squandered under circumstances. Undoubtedly these instances are extremely unusual in a society that believes in strictly regulating female sexuality thereby emphasising the absolute importance of producing children. However, there is one aspect in respect to which *pravṛtti dharma* assumes a stern and rigid stance, which is the issue of 'wasted sexuality'. Wasted sexuality entails not utilising to the fullest potential one's procreative ability. In the light of this strict dictum against wasting one's sexuality it becomes clear why *pravṛtti dharma* assumes a tolerant and almost liberal position while dealing with women's sexual transgression if it results in children.

Also, the extreme glorification of sexual unions which are divested of lust and desire, and are solely motivated by the aim of procreating new life becomes justified in the light of the notion of wasted sexuality. Sexual relations that are formed due to the primitive drives of lust and desire are vehemently condemned within the framework of *pravṛtti dharma* because it implies engaging in sexual acts for the sake of pleasure and not with the aim of procreating, which is seen as a primary example of wasted sexuality. Homosexuality is also condemned by the doctrines of *pravṛtti dharma* not because it is seen as an immoral act, rather it is seen

as a typical case of homosexuality: “Those men of evil conduct who enjoy sexual intercourse with inappropriate wombs, and those perverse-minded who engage in sexual intercourse among men—they will end up as eunuchs” (XIII.133.51)” (Dhand 98).

4. The Social Milieu of Marital Alliances and Relations: Rights and Obligations

In *Mahābhārata* marriage is conceptualised as any manner of sexual consummation between a man and woman. Therefore, it could be inferred that within the cultural ethos of ancient India, marriage was not the basis of sexual consummation, rather counterintuitively it was sexual union that formed the basis of marriage. Albeit it was always expected to fulfil the obligation of marrying before engaging in sexual relations, but if sexual relation did develop between an unmarried couple, then rather than condemning their act, their relation was sanctified by the sacrament of marriage. The story of Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta which appears in the Sambhava Parva testifies to this seemingly liberal attitude of *Mahābhārata* towards pre-marital sex.

According to the narrative, Śakuntalā, the biological daughter of ṛṣi Viśvāmitra and the *apsarā* Menakā, lived

in the hermitage of ṛṣi Kanva who was her adoptive father. King Duṣyanta who had gone out on a hunting expedition, chances upon the hermitage of Kanva, as he was following a fawn that he had struck with an arrow. Upon entering the serene hermitage, he encounters the beatific maiden Śakuntalā and instantly falls in love with her. He approaches her but Śakuntalā is reluctant to yield in to his advances as her father, ṛṣi Kanva was not present in the hermitage at that moment. Since there was no one to authorise her union with King Duṣyanta, Śakuntalā pleaded with Duṣyanta to wait until her father returns. “O king! My father has left the hermitage to collect fruits for food. Please wait for a while. He will return and give me to you” (*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.7.67). To this the king replies that a woman is endowed with the authority to present herself to a man with whom she wishes to consummate her sexual desire, thereby referring to the provision that a sexual union can be legitimised into marital relationship.

King Duṣyanta tries to reason with her in the following manner: “I wish that you accept me yourself... One is one’s own best friend. One can certainly resort to one’s own self. Therefore, in accordance with what is dharma, you can give your own self to others” (*Mahābhārata*. Trans.

Debroy, I.7.67). They thereby marry according to the *gandharva* form of marriage, which sanctions union between a man and woman even without the presence of an authority/guardian to bestow the woman to the man as his wife. The sexual union between Śakuntalā and Duṣyanta, which becomes sanctified by *gandharava* form of marriage, results in the birth of an illustrious son who later comes to be known as Bharata, the progenitor of Bharata dynasty. The *Mahābhārata*, thus acknowledges eight kinds of marriages as legally valid in order to ensure that each individual's procreative potential is optimally utilized and no wastage of sexuality occurs. King Duṣyanta explicates the eight different kinds of marriage to Śakuntalā as:

“Eight kinds of marriage are known to have the sanction of *dharma*—*brahma*, *daiva*, *arṣa*, *prajāpatya*, *asura*, *gandharva*, *rākṣasa* and *pāiśāca*... O unblemished one! Know that according to *dharma*, the first four are sanctioned for Brāhmaṇas and the first six for Kṣatriyas. For kings, even the *rākṣasa* form is

permissible. The *asura* form is sanctioned for Vaiśyas and śūdras. Of the five, three are in accordance with *dharma* and two are not sanctioned. The *pāiśāca* and *asura* forms should never be used. These are the principles laid down by *dharma* and one should follow them. The *gandharva* and *rākṣasa* forms are sanctioned for Kṣatriyas.”

(*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.7.67)

Polygeny was the well-established norm in ancient India, and in *Mahābhārata* as well one finds numerous references of men having more than one wife, in fact men having one wife are quite rare occurrences and seem to be exceptions rather than norm. However, the widespread acceptance of polygeny did not imply that men were given free rein to take wives indiscriminately. *Pravṛtti dharma* laid down detailed guideline as to what was acceptable in the tradition of polygeny and what invalidated the marriage. In *pravṛtti dharma*, there was no fixed universal set of ethical codes, implying that each individual's *dharma* or set of

obligations were contingent on their interlocking matrices of *varṇa*, gender, class and occupation. Consequently, the *dharma* regulating polygeny also varied from one individual to another.

The detailed explications regarding the nature of polygeny prescribed for men of each *varṇa* occurs in the Śāntī Parva and Anuśāsana Parva. According to the text, a brāhmaṇa man was permitted to take four wives, a kṣatriya man was allowed to have three wives, a vaiśya man was allowed to take a maximum of two wives, and a śūdra man was permitted to have only one wife. However, one could find examples throughout the text of men blatantly defying the laws that determine the permissible number of wives to be taken, especially kings. For example, Arjuna despite being a kṣatriya had four wives, and similarly Krishna of Yadu dynasty who was also a kṣatriya had eight chief consorts, who were referred to as *Aṣṭabhāryā*. Perhaps the rules regulating the number of permissible wives were intended as general guidelines, rather than as unassailable dictums to be strictly adhered. Kings, at least, were given the liberty to break the laws with impunity and take as many wives as they desired.

The text also specifies the *varṇas* of the permissible wives to be taken as well as their hierarchical order in relation to

their co-wives. According to the text, a brāhmaṇa must compulsorily take one brāhmaṇa wife and was permitted to take three other wives belonging to the three lower *varṇas*, namely kṣatriya, vaiśya and śūdra. A kṣatriya man must compulsorily marry a kṣatriya woman and was also allowed to take two other wives belonging to the two lower *varṇas*, namely vaiśya and śūdra. Likewise, a vaiśya man was expected to marry a vaiśya woman and was also permitted to take a śūdra wife. A śūdra man however, was permitted to have only one śūdra woman as his wife.

A man's *varṇa* is therefore the chief determinant factor that specifies the number of permissible wives he could take as well as the types of women with whom he could be sexually active. Though a man could break the law determining the permissible number of wives for him, but he was, under no circumstances, allowed to engage in sexual unions except with his legally wedded wives. According to Arti Dhand, "The expectation that a man should be satisfied with his legal wife is the norm advocated by the *dharmāśāstrās*; as Wendy Doniger observes, 'The bottom line on sex and marriage in the *dharmāśāstrās*. . . is that neither the husband nor the wife should ever have sex with anyone else'" (103).

The wives of a man were hierarchised according to their *varṇas* rather than their age. Thus, a *brāhmaṇa* wife, irrespective of her age, was deemed senior to all the other wives. Likewise, a *kṣatriya* wife came next only to the *brāhmaṇa* wife, and was senior to the *vaiśya* and *śūdra* wife. A *vaiśya* wife was considered senior only to the *śūdra* wife; and a *śūdra* wife, irrespective of her age was considered to constitute the lowest rung in the hierarchy of seniority of wives. The hierarchisation of wives according to their *varṇas* is extended to their children, especially sons, as well. Hence, the son of the *brāhmaṇa* wife, irrespective of his age, is considered to be the senior most among the sons of all other wives.

Subsequently, the son of the *kṣatriya* wife is deemed to be senior than the sons of *vaiśya* and *śūdra* wives respectively. The son of *vaiśya* wife will always be senior to the son of *śūdra* wife. Like his mother, the son of the *śūdra* wife will occupy the lowest rung in the hierarchy of seniority. The hierarchisation of wives and their children solely on the basis of the wives' *varṇas* affected not only the social relations among the family but also influenced the inheritance laws. That is to say, the son of the *brāhmaṇa* wife being the senior most among all other sons, irrespective of his age, was entitled

to the greatest share of his father's property and assets. Hence, the son of a *dvija* man and *śūdra* woman, even though she was married to a *dvija* man, was not considered a *dvija*, rather he was always tagged as belonging to the lowest *varṇa* and therefore perpetually found himself at a disadvantaged position.

The right of the *dvija* man to take a *śūdra* wife is contested in many sections of the text because the union between a *dvija* man, especially a *brāhmaṇa* and a *śūdra* woman is deemed unrighteous. Arti Dhand in her book *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata* cites several passages from the text that condemn the union between a *brāhmaṇa* man and a *śūdra* woman:

“A *brāhmaṇa* takes a *śūdra* wife because of lust, or greed, or love . . . The scriptures do not approve of this. A *brāhmaṇa*, by taking a *śūdra* woman to his bed, experiences misery. He should, having done such an act, undergo expiation according to the rites laid down in the scriptures. His penances should be twice more severe if there are children

(XIII.47.8–10); The righteous condemn the practice of fathering children upon śūdra women. A brāhmaṇa who impregnates a śūdra woman must perform expiation (XIII.44.12).” (Dhand 101-102)

One could find a similarly harsh dictum against the union of a brāhmaṇa man and a śūdra woman in one of the passages in Udyog Parva that criminalises the brāhmaṇa who form any sexual relation with a śūdra woman by equating his offense with that of killing a brahman, which was considered to be the most abominable crime. Despite the stern injunctions addressed to *dvija* men, especially brāhmaṇa, against taking a śūdra woman as wife, men did not think twice before flouting such rules and unhesitatingly married śūdra women, as testified by the numerous instances within the text. However, as could be discerned from the implications of the above cited passages prohibiting sexual union between *dvija* men and śūdra women, the emphasis is laid more on not impregnating śūdra women. Hence, a *dvija* man can marry śūdra woman, although unadvisable, but he should father children only on the wives belonging to the three upper *varṇas*. He

should engage in sexual relation with his śūdra wife only when he desires pleasure. “The śūdra wife exists only for pleasure (ratyārthamapi śūdra syāt XIII.44.11)” (Dhand: 101). This injunction is in stark contrast to *pravṛtti dharma*’s notion of wasted sexuality which is conceptualised in order to maximise every individual’s procreative potential.

5. The Paradigm of Motherhood and the Politics of Reproduction

A socio-cultural milieu that places extreme importance on producing children, withholds the right of reproduction from śūdra women married to *dvija* men. Similarly, within *pravṛtti dharma*’s framework of sexual ethics, sexual unions that are solely motivated by satisfying one’s sexual desires and not intended towards procreation are severely condemned as an example of wasted sexuality. However, a *dvija* man is advised to *use* his śūdra wife for the same purpose that is for enjoying sexual pleasure and not for procreating new life. A passage in Anuśāsana Parva assumes an extremely derogatory tone for describing the children born of śūdra women and her brahman men: “Because they are born of [one whose body is as inauspicious as] the worst corpse, a brāhmaṇa’s sons, śūdra children, are called paraśavam [meaning one who is born of a corpse] (XIII.48.5)”

(Dhand 102). It is interesting to note the terms used for describing these children. While on one hand they are being referred to as ‘brāhmaṇa’s sons’, in the very next breath they are being described as ‘śūdra children’ and being censured as ‘*paraśavam*’.

Despite such harsh condemnations, there are several instances in *Mahābhārata* where the brāhmaṇa men not only engage in sexual relations with śūdra women but also father children on them. The most remarkable examples include the venerable ṛṣi Parāśara’s sexual union with Satyavatī, who at that point of time was a fisherman’s daughter and thus belonged to śūdra *varṇa*. Parāśara approached Satyavatī driven by lust, therefore their sexual union was motivated by lust and desire, and was not intended to procreate new life. However, as a consequence of this sexual relation Satyavatī conceived and the son, she gave birth to was known as Vyāsa, the venerable and illustrious sage who is accredited as the original composer of *Mahābhārata*. Vyāsa did not face any of the censure or discrimination that the foreboding passage regarding *paraśavam* suggested would be the doomed fate of such children who were born as a consequence of sexual unions between brāhmaṇa man and śūdra woman. In fact, the text rather than condemning him,

accorded Vyāsa with the status of a learned and revered brāhmaṇa, which is explicitly mentioned in the narrative in which Satyavatī beseeches him to father children upon the departed Vichitravīrya’s wives, namely Ambikā and Ambālikā.

Satyavatī considers Vyāsa to be the right candidate for performing the practice of *niyoga* with Ambikā and Ambālikā for two chief reasons. The first reason was that he was widely acknowledged and revered as an illustrious sage, she refers to him as ‘brahmarṣi’. There was an established tradition of men, especially kings, inviting revered brāhmaṇas to impregnate their wives, if they themselves failed to father children. The second reason which unarguably legitimised and validated Satyavatī’s preference of Vyāsa for impregnating her daughters-in-law was the fact that technically Vyāsa was the elder brother-in-law of Ambikā and Ambālikā since both Vyāsa and Vichitravīrya were born from Satyavatī’s womb, making them blood relatives. Satyavatī invokes both these factors while beseeching him to agree to her request. She pleads with him in the following words:

“According to destiny, you are my oldest son. O brahmarṣi! In that way, Vichitravīrya is my youngest. Therefore, just

as Bhīṣma is Vichitravīrya's brother on the father's side, you are his brother on the mother's side... Out of respect for your brother, for the sake of preserving Śantanu's lineage, to keep Bhīṣma's request and mine, out of compassion for all beings and to protect everyone, without any cruelty in your heart, do what I am asking you to do." (*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.7.99)

The practise of *niyoga* entails that when a husband is incapable of or unavailable (chiefly caused by untimely death) for impregnating his wife/wives, in such a scenario the husband or an elder member of his family has the authority to delegate the sacred duty of fathering children on the wives to either a revered brāhmaṇa or to the husband's brother. Since Vyāsa was both a revered brāhmaṇa and a half-brother of Vichitravīrya, he qualifies for the sacred task of impregnating Ambikā and Ambālikā according to both the criteria of the *niyoga* law, thereby making him the most suitable candidate for the task. Acknowledging his

credentials, Satyavatī requests Vyāsa as, "O son! Therefore, beget sons who are worthy of carrying forward our lineage on them [Ambikā and Ambālikā]. You alone are worthy" (*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.7.99).

Another example that starkly belies the harsh condemnation of children who are fathered by brāhmaṇa men on śūdra women is that of Vidura. Vidura is the half-brother of Kuru kings Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. According to the narrative, Satyavatī delegates Vyāsa the sacred duty of impregnating the widowed Kuru queens Ambikā and Ambālikā. He makes his first visit to Ambikā, who had no idea about the identity of this 'brother-in-law' of hers. On seeing the dishevelled appearance of Vyāsa, who was a stranger to her, she is seized by fear and shuts her eyes throughout their sexual union. As a consequence of Ambikā's improper conduct, the son conceived from this union was the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Since a blind individual was not deemed fit to rule a kingdom, Satyavatī once again pleads with Vyāsa: "How can a blind one be worthy to be king of the Kuru dynasty? How can he protect the lineage of your relatives and extend the lineage of his ancestors? Therefore, grant a second son to the Kuru lineage" (*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.7.100).

Following his mother's command, Vyāsa approaches Ambālikā. On seeing the unflattering appearance of Vyāsa, Ambālikā turns pale from anxiety. From this union is born Pāṇḍu who had a pale complexion because of his mother's lapse in decorum. Therefore, Satyawatī pleads with Vyāsa to father another child on Ambikā. However, Ambikā recalling her previous horrific experience with Vyāsa is reluctant to follow her mother-in-law's command, and instead bedecking her *dāsī*, maid servant, with beautiful garments and ornaments sends her to Vyāsa. The *dāsī*, unlike the royalties, doesn't flinch at Vyāsa's hideous appearance, rather she serves him respectfully and satisfies his desire. Pleased with her behaviour, Vyāsa blesses her saying that she will no longer remain a *dāsī*. Since the position of *dāsī* was invariably undertaken only by śūdra women, Vyāsa's words in this context could either mean that she would no longer serve as a servant or she would no longer carry the humiliating burden of being a śūdra. He also assures her that the child she conceived from this union, i.e., Vidura would be a prodigy: "The child in your womb will be devoted to *dharma* and in all the worlds, he will be supreme among those who are intelligent" (*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.7.100).

Thus, the child born from the sexual union between Vyāsa, who himself was the son of a brāhmaṇa father and śūdra mother, and the unnamed śūdra *dāsī* was acknowledged throughout the text as the wisest and most sagacious individual. As if to further erase the blemish of his being born from a śūdra womb and establish him firmly within the structure of *dvija* community, a narrative is woven that identifies the divine Dharma with Vidura, owing to a curse imposed on Dharma by the sage Mandavya. Therefore Vidura, despite being born of the sexual union between a brāhmaṇa man and śūdra woman, is accorded the position of minister in the Kuru court and is revered as the wisest man throughout the text.

However, it could be pointed out that Vidura does face discrimination owing to his 'mixed caste' status. Among all the three sons fathered by Vyāsa, Vidura was the most eligible candidate to ascend the throne. Dhṛtarāṣṭra despite being the oldest among all the three was denied the throne due to his blindness and thus the throne is ascended by Pāṇḍu. Even after Pāṇḍu's untimely demise, Vidura is not allowed to ascend the throne even as a regent, instead the court politics installs the blind Dhṛtarāṣṭra on the throne. However, there have been instances, in fact in the generation immediately

preceding Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Pāṇḍu's, where the son born from a śūdra womb ascended the throne. Satyawatī married King Śantanu on one condition that sons born from her womb would ascend the throne rather than Bhīṣma. For the sake of his father's happiness, Bhīṣma abnegated the throne that rightfully belonged to him in favour of Śantanu and Satyawatī's son Vichitravīrya. Therefore, *Mahābhārata* did not allow the dogmatic dictums and rigid hierarchies of Brahmanical orthodoxy to influence its narrative structure, rather by endowing the narrative with the freedom to chart its own path, it not only challenged the assumed supremacy of a particular ideological strand but allowed the organic evolution and harmonious co-existence of diverse discourses.

6. The Dialectics of Fidelity, *Varṇa* and Ethical Sexual Union

The commonplace notion that a man should have sexual relations only with his legally married wives has its roots in *Dharmāśāstrās*. Arti Dhand in her book *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata*, quotes Wendy Doniger on this issue: "Wendy Doniger observes, 'The bottom line on sex and marriage in the *dharmāśāstrās* . . . is that neither the husband nor the wife should ever have sex with anyone else'" (103). However, this injunction is

frequently disregarded within *Mahābhārata*, albeit only by men. Women, at any cost had to remain faithful to their husbands even when they remain absent for long intervals of time, which could span several years. For example, Ulūpī who united with Arjuna only once during his period of exile had been referred to as his wife throughout the text. After that one union, Ulūpī had no contact with Arjuna for nearly fifteen to twenty years but she was socially and morally obligated to maintain her faithfulness as Arjuna's wife.

While men, on the other hand, had no such ethical or social restrictions that prohibited them from engaging in sexual relations with women other than their spouses. In fact, men, married or otherwise had unrestricted sexual access to their female slaves, *dāsīs*. Men engaging in sexual relations with their *dāsīs* was such a commonplace practise that gifting large number of 'physically attractive' *dāsīs* was considered to be a status symbol among the elites. For instance, the *Asura* King Vrishaparva in order to placate Shukra and Devayānī offered his daughter Śarmiṣṭhā along with one thousand maidens as *dāsīs* to Devayānī. These one thousand and one *dāsīs* accompanied Devayānī to her husband's palace when she got married to King Yayāti.

When Śarmiṣṭhā was in her season she approached Yayāti to impregnate her. In order to justify her demand, she reasons with Yayāti in the following words: “O king! It is decreed that three people can never own—a wife, a slave and a son. Whatever they obtain belongs to the one who owns them. O king! I am Devayānī’s slave and that descendant of the Bhṛgu lineage is yours. She and I are equally yours” (*Mahābhārata*. Trans. Debroy, I.7.77). Śarmiṣṭhā in her discourse thus, reiterates the belief that any property owned by a wife including slaves ultimately belongs to her husband and a man has the unquestionable right to engage in sexual relation with the female slaves owned by him. The incontrovertible right of a man to sexually approach his female slaves and also the *dāsīs* owned by his wife/wives is reasserted in another narrative. In the thirteenth year of the Pāṇḍava’s exile when they were supposed to exist incognito, they went to King Virāṭa’s palace to take up various unassuming jobs in order to conceal their identity. Draupadī, disguising herself, approached Queen Sudeśnā in order to be recruited as her *dāsī*. But because of Draupadī’s extraordinary beauty Sudeśnā was hesitant to recruit her because once she becomes Sudeśnā’s *dāsī*, King Virāṭa would have unrestricted sexual access to her.

Therefore, the injunctions that men should engage in sexual relations only with their legally married wife and the sexual unions between a lawfully wedded husband and wife should be intended towards procreating new life, rather than being motivated by the primitive drives of desire and lust, were defiantly flouted throughout the narrative structure of *Mahābhārata*. The distinctive characteristic of men following the rigorous ascetic path of *nivṛtti dharma* was their disinclination towards and shunning of worldly attachments. But they regularly yielded to their sexual desires and impregnated maidens and *apsarās*. While the *apsarās* impregnated by the ascetics or any men in general were not bound by any social or moral obligations, the mortal maidens, on the other hand, faced ostracization if they conceived out of wedlock.

That is why while Menakā could not only insouciantly abandon her infant Śakuntalā but also acknowledge her abdication of maternal duty, Kuntī had to conceal the secret of Karṇa’s birth until after the Kurukṣetra war and even after her acknowledgment of her impropriety in abandoning Karṇa she faced derision not only from the society in large but also from her own sons. The *dvija* householder men also flouted the injunctions about

sexual conducts by not only engaging in sexual relations with women other than their wives, but also involving themselves in sexual acts which are purely driven by lust and desire rather than being motivated by the sacred goal of procreating new life. Beside the eight kinds of marriage, there was another categorisation that divided marriages into two types based on the *varṇa* of the husband and wife, namely *Anuloma* marriage and *Pratiloma* marriage. *Anuloma* marriage refers to the marital union of an upper *varṇa* man with a lower *varṇa* woman. Though a man is expected to marry a woman who belongs to the same *varṇa* as his, *anuloma* marriage is a widely accepted practices especially in case of polygynous marriages. *Pratiloma* marriage refers to the union between an upper *varṇa* woman and a lower *varṇa* man. Throughout the text *pratiloma* marriages are vehemently condemned and are perceived to be the cause of much consternation that has the potential to instigate social upheaval. Women are strongly dissuaded from entering into any kind of sexual relation with men belonging to *varṇas* lower than their own.

The children born from *pratiloma* union were not given place within the structure of the four *varṇas*, rather they formed subclasses that occupied a social

position even lower than the *śūdras*. In the *Anuśāsana Parva* exists a complex structure of hierarchisation of children born from different kinds of *pratiloma* union, such as between *brāhmaṇa* woman and *kṣatriya* man, *brāhmaṇa* woman and *vaiśya* man, *brāhmaṇa* woman and *śūdra* man, and so forth. Children born from such unions faced derision and discrimination, but children born from the union between *brāhmaṇa* woman and *śūdra* man, who were categorised as *chandala* were particularly subject to abject maliciousness. Arti Dhand describes the *Mahābhārata*'s attitude towards the *chandalas* in the following words:

“The *chandalas* are worse than the dogs of society; they are the ‘dog-eaters’ (*svapakah*) the most despised of all. In the *Mahābhārata*, a *chandala* is described as being ‘of fierce disposition. He is immersed in slaughter. He lives on the outskirts of cities and towns. Those among *brāhmaṇas* who father such children are regarded as the disgrace of their lineage’ (XIII.48.11).” (121)

7. Conclusion

It can therefore be surmised that sexuality, marriage and motherhood were perceived as complicated and highly individualised issues within the narrative and theological framework of *Mahābhārata*. Just like *dharma* that was differentiated according to one's *varṇa*, gender and occupation, the duties and obligations of wifedom and motherhood too were differentiated according to the woman's *varṇa*, marital status as well as whether she belonged to the category of mortals or preternatural beings. While one can find numerous instances of non-human mothers within the text, the text laid down detailed guidelines for mortal women describing not only their maternal and wifely duties but also determining who has the right to become a lawfully wedded wife and a socially legitimate mother.

It is indeed ironic that despite placing immense emphasis on an individual's duty to procreate, the text prohibits certain categories of women from becoming wife and mother, thereby squandering their procreative potential. *śūdra* wives of *dvija* men, *dāsīs*, and women becoming a part of *pratiloma* union were dissuaded from birthing children, because women belonging to such categories were perceived as an obstacle in the smooth functioning of

social machinery and therefore, by logical extension their progeny were also viewed as potential causes of social upheavals. The ideological tool employed by the text to dissuade such categories of women from procreating was by vilifying their children and ensuring that they lead a life of discrimination, disadvantage and derision. Thus, very subtly but firmly *Mahābhārata* controlled and determined the eligibility of becoming a wife and a mother, as well as extracted heavy price from such women as well as their children who dared to defy the strictures.

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