

# The Untold Story of a Panchkanya: Kunti from The Great Epic Mahabharata

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## ABSTRACT

Indian culture is governed by various mythical tales and epics. Most of these tales and epics highlights the sacrificing, submissive and obedient nature of women and focuses on their single dimensional personalities. Oppressed women facing injustice and hardships is not a new concept, it has been going on since the mythical times. This paper deals with the life of one of the important yet forgotten female character of the great epic Mahabharata, Kunti. Kunti was the first wife of King Pandu and the mother of the five Pandavs namely Yudhisthir, Bheem, Arjun and her two step sons Nakul and Sahadev along with Karana, whom she had out of a wedlock. She has often been criticized for various things but lesser known is the fact that her life was full of struggles and hardships. The Pain and suffering of Draupadi, Gandhari and Amba have always been discussed at length but Kunti, inspite of the injustice she faced since her childhood until she died has got no mention anywhere. The paper aims to give her the due credit she deserves, taking into account the various aspects of her life and analysing them through the lens of feminist criticism.

**KEYWORDS:** Great epic, injustice, forgotten, misunderstood, always criticized, stereotype

## INTRODUCTION

Women are perhaps the most misrepresented figures in the annals of history, religious texts and mythologies are no exception. The two Great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have always had a great influence on the masses.

The Mahabharata is a beautiful yet a complex form of text interwoven with various characters and their life stories. It is world's largest epic originally written by Sage Ved Vyasa in about 24,000 verses. No doubt it is a story about the conflict arising between the two sets of cousins for the throne but there is no denying in the fact that the women are the ones determining the plot of the text and thus yield power. From Satyawathi, who was Bhishma's stepmother to Uttara, wife of the great warrior Abhimanyu have controlled the history. The major women characters were Satyawathi, Amba reincarnated as Shikhandini, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi.

Kunti, whose birth name was Pritha, is one of the major characters of the epic. She was the mother of the five Pandavas and Karana whom she had before marriage. She is also related to lord Krishna .Lord Krishna's father Vasudev and Kunti were siblings. Since a very young age she had to go through a lot of hardships and her sacrifices have never been acknowledged. She is often described as a beautiful, wise, kind, spiritual and an intelligent woman. As Simone de Beauvoir quotes "**one is not born a woman; rather one becomes a woman**". Even before her birth her fate was decided by her father wherein she was given for adoption soon after she was born. Later in her life she had to abandon her first born,

Karana because she was not married and would have been considered as a disgrace, therefore she had to let him go. Like every other woman she had to give up her warrior skills after getting married. Little did she know that her suffering had just begun. She was always the second choice of her husband which caused her a lot of pain. Raising her sons all alone as a single mother was not easy for her. Not only this, she was also blamed for Draupadi being divided among the five Pandavas. Her suffering never ended till she was alive. In a patriarchal society a woman's identity is never acknowledged but Kunti was one of those women who stood her ground even when the circumstances were not in her favour and faced everything headstrong.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Kunti has often been held liable for the suffering of her son, Karana and her daughter-in-law, Draupadi. It is believed that Karana suffered injustice because she did not accept him as her son until the very end. On the other hand she is also blamed for intentionally dividing Draupadi among her five sons. The paper deals with the reasons behind all her actions and decisions that she took in her entire life. A woman like her, who was so wise and affectionate, it is hard to believe that she could have wronged her own son and her daughter-in-law whom she considered to be her daughter. Women are not necessarily each other's enemy is one aspect of this research.

Being a mother of five sons out of which two were her stepsons she never discriminated between any one of them rather the youngest of all her five sons who was actually her stepson was closest to her heart. Considering her to be an ideal mother the purpose of the discussion is also as to why a mother would abandon her own child?

Often accused for having her three children Yudhishthir, Bheem and Arjun from Yama, Vayu and Indra respectively her virtue has been questioned. But the question that arises here is, why did a woman with high morals and principles like her agree to have kids from three other gods? These questions are dealt with in the research.

Since mostly Kunti has been portrayed as an ideal daughter, a jealous wife, a heartless mother and a shrewd woman the aim of the paper is to look into her life and analyse the reasons behind everything, after all it was her life as a human. Koral Dasgupta's *Kunti* deals with the hidden desires and longings she had in her life. *The Kaunteyas: Queen Kunti's Mahabharata* by Madhavi S. Mahadevan also gives us a little insight about her life.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The approach that has been applied on the life of Kunti is the Feminist approach. Women are often forced to follow the societal forms and live according to the will of the men in their lives, be it their father, brother, husband or son. The research includes referring to the English translation of the Great Epic Mahabharata for basic knowledge about the character. Reference books like *Kunti* by Koral Dasgupta, *The Kaunteyas: Queen Kunti's Mahabharata* by Madhavi S. Mahadevan, journal by Ritu named Kunti in Mahabharata, Sharath Komarraju's Why did Kunti divide Draupadi? are some of the texts that have been referred to. Other than that depiction of Mata Kunti in various versions of Mahabharata telecasted on television and various videos are few other sources of information. Indian mythical tales are incomplete without the oral narration by some learned people who have a good amount of knowledge about the entire epic and its characters. These major sources of research give a

detailed and comprehensive knowledge about Kunti's life and the reasons behind her actions for which she has always been condemned for.

## ANALYSIS

### CHAPTER 1

#### FROM PRITHA TO KUNTI

A woman's fate is often decided by her father until she is married. Our mythology is no different. Kunti was actually born to the Yadava chief Shurasren, who was the ruler of Mathura. Pritha was the name given to her by her biological father. Her childhood was quite unusual. Even before she was born her father had promised to give her away to his childless cousin Kuntibhoja, a Bhoja Yadav of the Kunti Kingdom. As soon as she was born she was given away to Kuntibhoja. A father deciding the fate of his daughter is not a new concept, even today in the twenty first century the decisions of a girls' life are mostly governed by her father. Whether it is a case of female foeticide or child marriage, whether it is to not let the girls study and to restrict them from going out of the house, women have always been forced to live according to her father's will until she is married.

Kunti was then taken away to her new home and did not even get a chance to meet her mother and give her a proper goodbye. Later her name was changed from Pritha to Kunti. Kuntibhoja considered Kunti to be his lucky charm since he was blessed with kids she was brought home. Though in the palace all her desires were fulfilled but what she always longed for was her mother. She wanted someone to listen to her, someone she could share her fears and anxieties with and most of all she was tired of always being unwanted.

Once Sage Durvasa who is known for his anger visits the palace .Kuntibhoja knew that Kunti would not deny his command , therefore he ordered Kunti to serve the eccentric Sage, never asking from her whether she wanted to do it or not. As a dutiful daughter she served the Sage day and night. Women are always seen as the ones serving everyone in one way or the other. Household works, taking care of people, serving the guests are considered to be a woman's duty and that is what happened with Kunti. After seven days the Sage was happy with her dedication and devotion .Nobody knows how did Kunti serve him and in what forms. Satisfied with this the sage decided to reward Kunti and gave her a boon mantra using which she could invoke any god and bear a son from him. It is speculated that the sage had seen Kunti's future and thus gave her the boon although nobody knows the real reason behind this unusual reward.

Kunti's childhood has not been a pleasant one but like every other woman she was expected to let the others take command of her life and even if she did not want to, she was forced to do so. Today, on one hand women are ruling the world but on the other hand in many parts of the world women are still not allowed to step out of the house without permission.

### CHAPTER 2

#### SURYAPUTRA- A BOON OR A BANE?

Kunti grew up to be a beautiful, wise, kind and an intelligent young girl. She was not only intellectual but was a strong and a true warrior. But just like until the last decade no matter how smart, intelligent or strong a woman is, she is obliged to follow the societal norms which consider women to be weak and delicate.

One day out of curiosity of the boon she had got Kunti recited the mantra to check whether it actually works or not. As soon as she recited the mantra the Sun God appeared in front of her and decided to bless her with a baby boy. The question that surfaces here is that whether the child Sun God would give her would be born magically or would she have to indulge in a sexual intercourse with the him? Kunti then tells the sun god that she was just checking whether the mantra works or not and she does not want a child as yet since she is not married to which the Sun God replies.

*“O beautiful Pritha, your meeting with the demigods cannot be fruitless. Therefore, let me place my seed in your womb so that you may bear a son. I shall arrange to keep your virginity intact, since you are still an unmarried girl”.*

These lines have been taken from Srimad Bhagvatam's translation which gives us an idea that she was forced to indulge in a sexual intercourse with the Sun God but there is another aspect to the story which says that during that time it was not unlikely to have children magically. There have been many instances where the children were born without the actual physical process and the greatest example is that of Gandhari giving birth to hundred sons through a magical process. In Srimad Bhagvatam Lectures it is mentioned that Kunti gave birth to her child through her ear and thus the child was named as Karana.

After Karana was born Kunti decided to keep the baby and she was ready to leave everything behind for her child, but then she was emotionally manipulated into abandoning the child so as to protect her dignity and family's reputation. Unwillingly Kunti had to float the child on a boat which was later found by a carpenter who raised Karana as Radhe. The guilt of abandoning her child always stayed with her. Even if she would have kept the baby neither she nor her son would have been accepted by the society. This is the normal way of how society works even today. Having a child out of the wedlock is considered to be a taboo in India. Neither the mother nor the child gets any acceptance from the society. Even the famous celebrities and people in power end up getting married in order to save their child from being given the title of an illegitimate child. Most of the times women end up marrying toxic men and then are forced to suffer throughout their lives.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE BEGINNING OF LIFELONG AGONY

Kunti's married life was not a happy one and this marks the beginning of her lifelong agony and suffering.

Kunti was married to King Pandu of Hastinapur. As a young girl she had various dreams about her married life after but unfortunately once she got married all her dreams were shattered. Immediately after they got married King Pandu had to leave for settling some political dispute. The newly wedded bride did not get even a minute to talk to her husband. She convinced herself that she will get enough time with her husband once he returns. But things turned out to be very different from what she expected. Her happiness was short lived because when King Pandu returned he brought along with him his second wife, Madri, who is known to be quite attractive. After getting married for the second time Pandu not only distanced himself from Kunti but they also lived as strangers in the palace. Kunti never received the love and admiration she had expected to get from her husband.

Her life took another setback when Pandu was cursed by a Sage that if he tried to consummate his marriage with any of his two wives he will die then and there. After this Pandu with his two wives proceeded towards Himalaya leaving behind his kingdom under the care of his blind brother

Dhritrashtra. Pandu was desperate to have children and forces Kunti to beget children for him by soliciting a worthy person. Women are often forced to do things against their principles just to please their husbands because since childhood they have been taught that their husband is equivalent to God. Kunti was a woman with high morals and therefore when she heard her husband's request she was horrified and refuses by saying

***“Not even in touch will I be embraced by another”.***

As mentioned in *Adi Parva* Pandu tries to convince her by narrating various stories and says

***“Until then, women were not restricted to the house, they were not dependent on family members; they moved about freely, they enjoyed themselves freely. Until then they were free; they could sleep within any men they liked from the age of puberty; they could be unfaithful to their husbands, and yet were not viewed sinful...the greatest rishis have praised the ancient tradition-based custom;...the northern Kurus still practice it...the new custom is very recent.***

***Sweet lady, I fold my palms joining the tips of my lotus-leaf rosy fingers and I implore you listen to me, the auspicious none”***

Kunti was then reminded of her boon she had received years ago as a reward for her service and using that she gave Pandu three sons Yudhisthir, Bheem and Arjun from the three Gods which were god Yama, god Vayu and Indradev respectively. When her greedy husband asks for more children Kunti denies by saying

***“I have already used the mantra three times, O Lord, and have taken three gods as paramours, including you therefore, the number of men I have known has come to four .You know that our scriptures shun away any woman who has taken five or more lovers in her life”.***

Later Pandu requests her to share mantra with Madri. Kunti had to agree to share the mantra to fulfil her husband's desire of having more children. Madri bears twins who were named as Nakul and Sahdev.

Now what if Kunti had not got that boon? The answer is simple, like every other woman is expected to fulfil her husband's wish she would also had to compromise with her principles and might have to bear children from other men. Women are always taken as a medium to fulfil a man's desires. However men are not expected to do so.

One day Pandu was consumed by his lust and consummated his marriage with Madri but as per the curse he had got, he died immediately.

Kunti never received the love she deserved and yearned for but she never hated Madri. The only feeling that she had was envy because it was Madri who ascended the funeral pyre with Pandu's corpse and had received all his love. Pointing out the successful and complete marriage that Madri had Kunti cries and says

***“Princess of Bahlika! You are fortunate indeed, I never had the chance to see his face radiant. Could I bring up your children as my own?”***

To this Madri replies

***“You are blessed. There is none like you; you are my light, my guide, most respect worthy. Greater in status, purer in virtue”***

This conversation between the two women also debunks the notions that women are each other's enemies. Women, does not matter what their relationship is, can be respectful towards each other.

After the death of Pandu and Madri, Kunti returned to Hastinapur and then began a new struggle of her life.



Even today, most of the times a widow is not accepted by her late husband's family. Even if she is allowed to stay in the house she is dominated by the entire family. She is often criticised and is accused of being unlucky for the family. Rural areas seem to have a much larger number of people who are orthodox and believe in such superstitions though people living in urban areas are no less.

## CHAPTER 4

### A DEVOTED MOTHER

A mother is always taken for granted. Everything she does for her child is considered to be her duty. Often we forget that a mother is also a human being.

Kunti is often criticized for not being a good and a dutiful mother because of what she did with Karana but no one really realizes how difficult it must have been for her to abandon her son. Even more difficult was to meet him after years and was still not able to shower her motherly love and affection on her first born. As a mother it was heartbreaking for her to see her sons fighting against each other since Karana supported Kauravas unaware of the fact that he was fighting against his own brothers. When Karana got to know about Kunti being his biological mother he did not accept her. Not only Karana, but on Kurukshetra's battlefield when the Pandavas got to know about Karana being their brother while he was on his deathbed all of them questioned and blamed Kunti for being selfish and for hiding the truth. She was belittled by her five sons for whom she struggled and sacrificed her whole life.

Kunti might not have been a good mother to Karana but she was always a wonderful mother for her five sons specially her stepsons. She was stern and strict with her three sons but immensely loved her younger stepsons Nakul and Sahdev. The epic states that the day Pandavs were banished Kunti cried her heart out and said

*“At least let Sahdev stay back with me, I cannot live without him”* (Mitra 156)

Kunti equally suffered with all her sons when the Kauravs tried to burn them alive. She raised her sons to be great warriors and intellectuals with high morals. The only day she felt she failed was the day of gambling when her sons could not protect her daughter-in-law's honour.

Every mother raises her child with all her heart and soul. She tries to do the best she can in every way in spite of this she is the one who is blamed for the child's misdeeds. But is it fair?

There can be no denying in the fact that Kunti was indeed a very good mother who always wanted the best for her children.

## CHAPTER 5

### KUNTI AND DRAUPADI'S RELATIONSHIP

“Two women can never be good to each other and so a woman is a woman's greatest enemy.” This is a stereotype attached to women especially when we talk about the relationship of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. This notion attached with Kunti and Draupadi also. Kunti is blamed for Draupadi's suffering because her words led to Draupadi being divided among her five sons. But lesser known is the fact that Kunti and Draupadi actually shared a very good relationship with each other. These were the words Kunti said to Lord Krishna on the eve of the war

*“More than all my sons, O Janardana, is the daughter of Drupada dear to me. High born and possessed of great beauty, she is endued with every accomplishment... When I remember the forcible dragging of Draupadi to the assembly, then neither Vibhatsu nor Yudhishthira, nor Bhima, nor*

*Nakula, nor Sahdeva, becometh an object of affection to me*”(Udyoga Parva: Bhagwat Yana Parva: Section XC)

Kunti never intentionally demanded to divide Draupadi among the five Pandavas. It was the Pandavas who miscommunicated and asked their mother to see what they had got in alms. Kunti had not see what were they talking about since no name was taken and she never expected her sons to refer to a woman in the way they did but when she realised she said

*“Oh what have I said?”*

Anxious from fear of sin, and reflecting how everyone could be extricated from the situation, she took the Yajnaseni by the hand and said to Yudhishtira

*“The daughter of the king Yajnasena upon being represented to me by thy younger brothers as the alms they had obtained from ignorance, O king, I said what was proper, viz, Enjoy ye all what hath been obtained. O thou bull of the Kuru race, tell me how my speech may not become untrue; how my sin may not touch the daughter if the king of Panchala, and how also she may not become uneasy.”* (Adi Parva: Swayamvara Parva: Section CLXLIII)

Though Kunti had uttered the words to divide but actually it was Yudhishtir and Arjun who decided whether Draupadi would marry all five of them or none of them.

This patriarchy still prevails in our society. It is considered that all the important decisions should be taken by the male members of the family no matter what his age is. In the entire situation another thing that is highlighted is that Draupadi was never asked about what she wanted.

There was mutual love and respect among the two women. Draupadi admired and thought highly of her mother-in-law. She says

*“Personally do I wait everyday with food and drink and clothes upon the revered and truthful Kunti—that mother of heroes. Never do I show any preference for myself over her in matters of food and attire, and never do I reprove in her words that princess equal unto the Earth herself in forgiveness”* (Vana Parva: Draupadi –Satyabhama Samvada :Section CCXXXI)

These lines highlight the kind of relationship both of them shared.

It has become a tradition to blame the woman for whatever wrong happens.

## CONCLUSION

The women in Mahabharata have been treated as slaves, property, chattel and commodities used for the pleasure of men. The key characteristics are seen to be suppression, obedience and silence. Though women like Draupadi and Kunti still had the courage to take a stand for themselves but there were many more who could not.

Kunti as a character definitely stands out. Though her choices and decisions have often been questioned but she did what she felt was right after all it was her life as a human. Before the Kurukshetra war when the Pandavs and Draupadi were sent to exile Kunti was forced to live with her children’s enemies and see them prosper. Even after the war when her son became the king she did not stay with them, instead chose to accompany her sister-in-law, Gandhari and brother-in-laws Dhrishashtra and Vidhura to a forest and eventually died in a forest fire.

Kunti is considered to be one among the five Panchkanya. She has often been ignored and her struggles have never been taken into consideration.

We are all well aware of the fact that until the last few decades a woman’s opinion and perspective was given no importance, her side of the story was never heard since she was treated as someone who does

not hold any place in this male dominated society. Starting from Draupadi to Amba followed by Gandhari, the plight of all these women still have certain mentions in various texts but the story from Kunti's point of view has comparatively had almost no mention anywhere.

In modern times instances of injustice from mythology are not considered important since it is felt that with the feminist movements the position of women has improved and no injustice is being done to them but the actual reality is very different. Women are still subjected to various plights like domestic violence, female foeticide, sexual assaults, eve teasing etc. In our everyday life there are various examples of misogyny which we often ignore since it has seeped in so deep that we have accepted it to be normal which is a much bigger problem. References from mythology are still applicable in the modern world. Women then and women now do not have much difference.

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