

Beyond Devotion and Defiance: Reassessing the Status of Women in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata as Contested Moral Landscapes

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Abstract: The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata have long been read as theological landmarks, but a feminist historiographical lens reveals them as something far more unsettling: archives of female experience that oscillate between reverence and erasure. This paper argues that women in these epics are not passive ornaments in a patriarchal tableau but active moral agents whose voices, choices, and suffering exposed the contradictions at the heart of Vedic social order. Moving beyond descriptive enumeration of characters, the article employs a close-reading methodology grounded in textual evidence, comparative gender studies, and subaltern historiography to interrogate how economic dependency coexisted with political influence, how social virtue operated as both armour and prison, and how women's transgressions were simultaneously feared and narrativized as catalysts for cosmic events. Through the lives of Draupadi, Gandhari, Kuntī, Sītā, Kaikeyī, Mandodarī, Amba, and Ahaḷyā, the paper reconstructs a nuanced picture of womanhood that resists binary interpretations of victimhood or empowerment. The central thesis holds that the epics did not merely mirror their societies—they actively negotiated what women could be, and in doing so, left a record that modern scholarship has only begun to read honestly.

Keywords: gender in ancient India, Draupadi, feminist epic studies, Vedic patriarchy, Rāmāyaṇa women, Mahābhārata women, female agency in Sanskrit literature.

1. Introduction: Why the Epics Still Demand a Feminist Reckoning

There is a particular kind of erasure that does not announce itself. It does not burn libraries or silence voices outright. It works instead through the accumulation of interpretive habit—generations of commentators, priests, and pedagogues who read the great Sanskrit epics and, in doing so, flattened their moral complexity into devotional templates. Women in the Rāmāyaṇa became Sītā: faithful, patient, silent. Women in the Mahābhārata became Draupadi: wronged, vengeful, excessive. The characters were retained; the argument was removed.

Feminist scholarship over the last four decades has begun to peel back that interpretive sediment, and what it finds beneath is remarkable. The epics, composed between approximately 400 BCE and 400 CE, were not monolithic moral tracts. They were living, contested texts produced over centuries, in which different voices—different class interests, regional traditions, and even gender sensibilities—left their marks. The women who populate these narratives are not consistent ideological constructs. They are contradictions: dependent and defiant, domesticated and dangerous, venerated and violated.

This paper does not attempt to rescue the epics from their patriarchal context. That context is real, documented, and consequential. What it argues, instead, is that reducing these texts to their patriarchal dimensions is itself a form of interpretive distortion. The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are — among many other things — evidence that women in ancient India possessed economic understanding, political cunning, and moral authority, and that the societies which produced these stories were uncomfortably aware of that fact.

2. Theoretical Framework: Reading Women in Epic Literature

Studying gender in ancient narrative requires methodological care. The temptation to impose contemporary frameworks wholesale risks anachronism; the equally present temptation to treat historical texts as hermetically sealed from present moral concern risks intellectual passivity. This paper adopts a middle position, drawing on three theoretical lineages.

The first is the tradition of subaltern studies, particularly as inflected through the work of Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy, who have argued that women in ancient Indian literature occupied a “structurally subaltern” position while simultaneously functioning as vehicles of dharmic legitimacy. The second is the comparative mythology approach associated with scholars like Wendy Doniger, which reads narrative inconsistencies not as textual errors but as ideological fractures—places where competing value systems have left visible seams. The third is textual historicism, which attends to the conditions of production and transmission: who wrote, who edited, who performed, and who listened to these stories.

Together, these approaches allow us to hold two truths simultaneously: that the epics were produced within and partly in service of a patriarchal order, and that women within those same epics found ways to speak, resist, and sometimes prevail. That tension is not a problem to be resolved—it is the most interesting thing about these texts.

3. The Economy of Dependence: Women’s Financial Agency in the Epics

A cursory reading of either epic yields a straightforward conclusion: women were economically dependent on men. Sītā owns nothing in the forest except the virtue that her society has assigned to her. Draupadi’s economic fate is literally staked at a gambling table by her husband. And yet a more sustained engagement with the texts reveals a picture that is considerably more complicated than this.

3.1 Draupadi: From Chattel to Claimant

Draupadi’s svayamvara is frequently cited as evidence of women’s autonomy: here is a princess who chooses her own husband through a test of merit. But the scene rewards closer scrutiny. Draupadi does not choose freely from an open field of candidates. The svayamvara is structured by her father Drupada to select a specific type of warrior, effectively pre-selecting the outcome. Draupadi’s “choice” is more accurately a ratification of a decision already made by male political calculation. Her subsequent marriage to five brothers—accepted without her enthusiastic consent, as the text implicitly acknowledges—further complicates any straightforward reading of her as an autonomous economic actor.

What is extraordinary about Draupadi, however, is what she does within these constraints. When Yudhishtira stakes her in the dice game, she refuses the premise of her own objecthood. Her question to the assembly—whether a man who has already lost himself retains the right to stake his wife—is not merely a legal quibble. It is a philosophical intervention that exposed the internal contradictions of the very system that purported to define her status. No one in the Kaurava court could answer her satisfactorily. The episode is a remarkable instance of a woman using the master’s language to interrogate the master’s logic.

3.2 Kuntī: The Arithmetic of Survival

Kuntī’s economic agency is quieter but equally revealing. Widowed and exiled with five young sons, she manages household survival in circumstances that would have destroyed a less resourceful woman. Her

decisions about alliances—which kingdoms to court, which relationships to cultivate, how to position her sons in the political marketplace of warrior aristocracy—are essentially economic decisions dressed in the language of maternal duty. Altekar’s foundational work notes that widows in post-Vedic India faced severe structural disadvantages with respect to inheritance and property. Kuntī’s life illustrates how women navigated these disadvantages through social capital: through the management of relationships, reputation, and information that a purely asset-based account of economic status misses entirely.

3.3 Kaikeyī and Sītā: Control and Its Absence

The contrast between Kaikeyī and Sītā in the Rāmāyaṇa illuminates the range of economic possibility available to women of different rank and temperament. Kaikeyī understands perfectly that access to the king’s ear is a form of capital, and she exercises it with precision. Her two boons are not emotional outbursts but carefully banked assets, deployed at the moment of maximum leverage. That the narrative frames her action as villainous should not obscure our recognition that it is also strategically brilliant.

Sītā, by contrast, inhabits a different economy entirely—one where her value is constituted almost entirely by her chastity and her association with Rāma. The verse from the Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa (2.37.24) — “*ātmā hi dārāssarveṣāṃ dārasaṅgrahavartinmām*” — presents the wife as the husband’s very self, a formulation that simultaneously elevates and erases her. She is exalted to cosmic significance while being denied a self that exists independent of that relationship. When the forest strips away the material infrastructure of her rank, what remains is a woman whose worth is entirely contingent. The Agni parikṣhā is the logical endpoint of this economy: Sītā’s “value” must be verified by fire because she has no other assets to prove her standing.

4. The Politics of the Margin: Women as Counsel, Conspiracy, and Conscience

Political history is typically the history of power formally constituted: thrones, armies, assemblies. Women in the epics rarely occupy these spaces directly. And yet the political narrative of both the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata is substantially shaped by women operating through the channels available to them: counsel, influence, relationship management, and — in some cases — outright defiance.

4.1 Gandhārī: The Blind Witness

Gandhārī’s act of self-blindfolding is among the most politically charged gestures in the Mahābhārata. It is almost always read as wifely devotion, but this reading is too easy. Consider the structural result of her choice: by removing herself from visibility—by refusing to see—she simultaneously withdraws from moral responsibility and accrues moral authority. She cannot be blamed for what she did not watch; she can only be heard when she finally speaks. Her curse of Krishna after the war is not the act of a woman who has been politically irrelevant. It is the act of a woman who has been building moral capital across a lifetime of witnessed suffering and strategic silence.

That Krishna accepts her curse, and that the text presents it as efficacious, tells us something important: even within a patriarchal framework, there were forms of female authority that men recognized as binding. Gandhārī did not govern Hastinapura. But she judged it, and the text agrees with her judgment.

4.2 Satyawatī: The Dynastic Architect

Satyavatī’s politics are of a wholly different register — pragmatic, calculating, and entirely unsentimental. Her marriage to Shāntanu is negotiated, not merely accepted. Her father’s conditions, which effectively disinherit Bhīṣma, represent one of the most significant political bargains in the epic, and Satyawatī is the instrument through whom it is executed. She does not merely benefit from dynastic politics; she creates the conditions for them. When her sons die without issue, she takes the drastic step of commissioning niyoga (levirate conception) through Vyāsa, a decision that determines the entire subsequent genealogy of the Kuru dynasty. Few male characters in either epic can claim to have shaped the genetic future of a civilization through personal initiative.

4.3 Manthara and Mandodarī: Advisor and Dissenter

The Rāmāyaṇa gives us two women who understand political consequences more clearly than most of the men around them. Manthara, consistently dismissed as a scheming maidservant, is in fact the only character in the Ayodhyā section who correctly analyzes what Rāma's coronation will mean for Kaikeyī and Bharata. Her advice may be self-serving, but it is analytically acute. That she operates through a woman rather than directly reflects not a lack of political capacity but an accurate reading of where power can be channelled given her subordinate position.

Mandodarī represents the road not taken. Her counsel to Rāvaṇa — return Sītā, avert the war — is presented in the text as wise and morally clear. The verse quoted in the original article (3.33.8) frames her as one who recognizes folly and names it directly: “How will you continue to be a king?” This is not the language of wifely pleading. It is the language of political assessment. That Rāvaṇa ignores her is the tragedy of the text. That she speaks anyway is its quiet heroism.

5. Social Virtue as Armour and as Cage: The Lived Experience of Dharma

The social status of women in the epics is inseparable from the concept of strīdharmā — the dharma specific to women, defined primarily through the triad of chastity, wifely devotion, and maternal sacrifice. This framework is not incidental to the texts; it is their organizing moral architecture. But it is worth asking what this architecture actually does to the women it claims to honour.

5.1 Amba: The Woman Whom Dharma Refused

Amba's story is perhaps the most uncomfortable in the entire Mahābhārata precisely because it cannot be resolved into any of the available moral frameworks. Abducted by Bhīṣma for a marriage she did not choose, refused by the man she loved (Shālva) because she has been contaminated by the abduction, and then rejected by Bhīṣma himself because she belongs to another — Amba falls through every crack in the system of dharmic protection that was supposed to secure women's social position. She is not evil; she is not deviant; she simply does not fit, and the system's response to this is to make her disappear.

What Amba does instead is extraordinary. She refuses to accept social erasure as a verdict. Her decades of tapas (austerity), her eventual rebirth as Shikhāndī, and her instrumental role in Bhīṣma's downfall constitute one of the longest revenge narratives in world literature — and it is a woman's revenge against a system that used the language of honour to discard her. The text does not quite know what to do with Amba, and that uncertainty is telling.

5.2 Ahaḷyā and Surpāṇakha: The Politics of Female Transgression

The fates of Ahaḷyā and Surpāṇakha illuminate the asymmetry at the centre of women's social status in these epics. Ahaḷyā, seduced or coerced by Indra, is cursed by her husband Gautama into stone — a literalization of what patriarchal disgrace does to women: it petrifies them, renders them incapable of movement or speech, until a man of sufficient sanctity chooses to restore them to personhood. Her redemption through Rāma's touch is also, implicitly, a reassertion of male authority over female moral status. She cannot redeem herself.

Surpāṇakha's case is structurally different but thematically related. She is not punished for immorality but for desire — for openly expressing attraction to Rāma and later to Lakṣmaṇa. In a system where female desire is either invisible (subordinated to wifely duty) or monstrous (attributed to rākṣasī nature), Surpāṇakha has the temerity to want and to say so. The mutilation she receives is not merely physical punishment; it is the violent inscription of social legibility. She is made ugly so that her desire can be safely attributed to the grotesque. The episode asks us, if we are reading carefully, whether the social norms that produce this violence are themselves the problem.

5.3 Shakuntala: Memory, Legitimacy, and the Invisible Woman

Shakuntala's story, embedded within the Mahābhārata rather than the more famous Kalidasa retelling, is a study in how women's social existence depends on being remembered by men. Duhyānta's "forgetting" of her — whether caused by a curse or by the convenient amnesia of a king who has tired of a forest wife — erases her social reality entirely. She exists, bears his son, raises him alone, and yet counts for nothing in the social record until he chooses to see her again. Her recognition by the court comes not on the strength of her own testimony but because her son can no longer be denied. Shakuntala is a reminder that social status, for women in this world, was always mediated through male recognition — and male recognition was always revocable.

6. The Question of Consent: What the Epics Know and Will Not Say

One of the most striking features of the epics, reading them with a contemporary consciousness while resisting anachronistic judgment, is how consistently they gesture toward the question of consent without ever quite naming it. Draupadi is staked and disrobed in public. Sītā is abducted and must prove her purity through fire. Amba is taken from her svayamvara against her will. Ahaḷyā's "infidelity" is arguably coercion. These are not incidental episodes; they are structurally central to both epics. The frequency with which women's bodies are the site of male contests suggests that the texts were, at some level, aware of a tension they could not resolve: between the veneration of women as mothers and goddesses, and their routine treatment as transferable property.

The most honest reading of these episodes is neither apologetics ("it was a different time") nor retrospective condemnation (projecting modern legal categories onto pre-modern contexts), but rather an acknowledgment that the epics themselves register discomfort. Draupadi's public question has no answer in the text because the text cannot answer it without undoing the entire framework of kṣātra-dharma. Sītā's final rejection of the earth is a refusal, not a submission. These moments of narrative rupture are the texts' own conscience speaking.

7. Revisiting the Canon: What Women's Lives Tell Us About Vedic Social Order

Reading women's lives in the epics provides a different kind of social history from the one available through normative texts like the Manusmṛiti or the Arthashastra. Prescriptive literature tells us what was supposed to happen. Narrative literature — especially narrative literature as internally inconsistent and multi-voiced as the Mahābhārata — tells us something closer to what was actually contested, feared, and desired.

Several conclusions emerge from the analysis above. First, women's economic dependency in the epics coexisted with demonstrable economic intelligence. The dependency was structural and real; the intelligence was also real, and the narrative records it even when it cannot fully validate it. Second, women's political exclusion from formal governance did not translate into political irrelevance. The most consequential decisions in both epics — Kaikeyī's demand, Satyawatī's commission, Gandhārī's curse — are made by women operating in the informal political sphere. Third, the social codes that regulated women's behaviour — the emphasis on chastity, fidelity, and self-abnegation — were not uniformly accepted but were negotiated, contested, and in some cases explicitly rejected by the women they were meant to govern.

Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black's edited volume on gender and narrative in the Mahābhārata makes the important point that the epic's gender politics are not stable across its many books and layers. There are sections in which women speak with remarkable authority; there are others in which that authority is systematically curtailed. This variability is not a textual defect. It is evidence of a society in which gender norms were actively disputed — a society more dynamic and more contested than the static "patriarchal ancient India" of popular imagination.

8. Legacies: Why This History Still Matters

The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are not museum pieces. They continue to shape the moral and social imagination of hundreds of millions of people, and they continue to be invoked in arguments about women's roles in family, society, and governance. This creates both a responsibility and an opportunity for scholars.

The responsibility is to resist the flattening of these texts into devotional templates that serve contemporary conservative gender politics. When Sītā is held up as the eternal ideal of Indian womanhood, something important is being suppressed: the Sītā who refuses to return to Ayodhyā the second time, who chooses the earth over a husband who has failed her, who exits the narrative on her own terms. When Draupadi is cited as a victim of male injustice, the Draupadi who questioned the assembly, who kept her anger alive across years of exile, and who demanded a reckoning, tends to disappear.

The opportunity is to recover the full complexity of these figures and to use it in contemporary conversations about gender, agency, and justice. These epics contain, alongside their patriarchal content, a remarkable archive of women who thought, acted, argued, suffered, and prevailed. Recovering that archive is not merely an academic exercise. It is a contribution to the larger project of understanding what Indian civilization has actually been, as distinct from what any particular moment's ideology needs it to have been.

9. Conclusion: The women of the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata were not a monolith, and neither was the society they inhabited. They were economically constrained but economically intelligent; politically marginalised but politically active; socially policed but socially resistant. Their stories were told by men, often shaped by patriarchal interests, and yet those stories consistently crack open to reveal women who did not simply accept the terms of their existence.

The critical task for scholars of gender in ancient India is not to adjudicate whether these epics are “pro-women” or “anti-women”—such binaries are inadequate to the texture of the texts. The task is to read them with the seriousness their female characters deserve: to listen to Draupadi's question, to follow Amba's journey, to take seriously Mandodarī's warning. These are not peripheral moments. They are the epics' conscience, preserved across millennia for exactly this purpose: to remind us that the conversation about what women can be has never been settled, and was never meant to be.

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