

Kunti Revisionised: A Feministic study of Madhavi S. Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas*

A. Subbulakshmi,
Ph.D Research Scholar (Full-time),
PG & Research Dept. of English,
V. O. Chidambaram College,
Thoothukudi.

DR. R. Ajith,
Assistant Professor,
PG & Research Dept. of English,
V. O. Chidambaram College,
Thoothukudi.

Mob: 9446796994

Email: subha.arumugam@yahoo.com

Email: ajithranchal@gmail.com

(Manonmanium Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli- 627 012, Tamil Nadu, India.)

Abstract:

Mahabharata is one of the two great epic poems in India and the other is Ramayana. Mahabharata is the world's largest epic by sage Vyasa who composed it in 24,000 verses. Indian myths hold a moral instructions and it helps to discover the way for the achievement. Madhavi S. Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas* retells the great Indian myth Mahabharata through the viewpoint of Kunti. Madhavi blended her Feministic approach with great epic Mahabharata and made it beautiful literary collaboration. Kunti as a woman stands apart from all the other characters in Mahabharata. This paper tries to explore the feministic portrayal of Kunti as a woman destined to live in a predicament-ridden life in Madhavi S. Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas*.

Key words: Feminism, boon, motherhood, war, struggle.

Full Paper:

“Death is important to a man, but survival is more important to a woman”

- Madhavi S. Mahadevan

Mahabharata is one of the two great epic poems in India and the other is Ramayana. Mahabharata is the world's largest epic by sage Vyasa who composed it in 24,000 verses. This epic poem was recited for the first time by Vaisampayana in the great ceremonial sacrifice of Janamejaya, the grandson of Abhimanyu. Mahabharata is a saga of power, rivalry between cousins, greed for power and wealth and fight for throne between Pandavas and Kauravas. "Mahabharata" is the war fought between the brothers between Pandavas and Kauravas. As per the story the war was fought for 'Dharmasamsthapana' i.e to reinstate justice in society. This epic centers on the conflict regarding the issue of succession to the throne of Hastinapur. It traces the struggle of the Pandavas along with their wife Draupadi to get justice and the final war of Kurukshetra which results in annihilation.

Apart from the fables and stories, Indian myths are a moral instructions and it helps to discover the way for life achievement. Myth acts as a mentor and guide to live a noble life. It explains the problems and issues of life through epic legends, sagas and folktales. The reality of Hindu culture lies in the Vedic texts, Puranas, Kaavyas and epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. Myths hold traditional belief, cultural values, customs and fables. The use of myth in literature lies in the strong belief that myth is embodiment of absolute truth. The writers tend to revisit the past in search of reality and truth. Retelling of mythical stories and mythical characters has now become a new field of exploration. Writers began to analyse mythical stories with feministic, cultural and psycho analytic approaches. Fresh interpretations are made on the great Indian epic Mahabharata's stories and characters. The women characters of the epic presented as an ideal epitome of patience and tolerance. But women are kept at the bottom of the social ladder and their existence is neglected and suppressed. But the contemporary writers recreated, revised redefined the female characters and give them a new voice by making them strong, stubborn and independent. Madhavi S. Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas* retells the great Indian myth Mahabharata through the point of view of Kunti. Kunti is the most neglected, weak, disgraced character of Mahabharata retold as strong, determined and dominant figure. Madhavi blended her Feministic approach with great epic Mahabharata and made it beautiful literary collaboration.

Men stories are the bones of a bygone age, sanctified as relics, preserved in stone. Women's stories are written in water. Passed in silence from mother to daughter. About this perishable: flesh, blood, feelings, tears. Suffering.

Endurance is a sign of womanliness. But what men overlook is that endurance is that endurance is a crucible, it changes the existing state. (Mahadevan 2)

Madhavi S. Mahadevan has published two collections of short stories *Paltan Tales* (2005) and *Doppleganger* (2014). *The Kaunteyas* (2016) is her first novel, she has also written fiction for children. In *The Kaunteyas*, the author recast the Mahabharata from the view point of Kunti. This work replaces the idealized mother figure with the three dimensional woman providing new insights into the epic. It centers on the life of Kunti, the adoptive daughter of Kuntibhoja. She attempts to narrate Mahabharata through viewpoint of Kunti's. She retold the great epic in the first person narrative through the eyes of Kunti. The story of the novel covers the whole life of Kunti from her birth, her childhood, her marriage with Pandu and her journey as mother.

Pritha is the daughter of Shura of the Yadu clan. She is the sister of Vasudeva, the Father of Krishna. She was adopted to the childless king Kuntibhoja, then after she came to known as 'Kunti'. After the arrival of Kunti, Kuntibhoja was blessed with children. So, he considers her as his lucky charm and took care of her. When she is young, Rishi Durvasa blessed her with Vashikaran mantra for serving him well.

'Each one is a *vashikaran* manta,' he said. 'It gives you power over the gods. When you repeat and meditate upon the god you wish to call, he will appear before you. You, in turn, will accept the *Prasad* the divine being bestows on you.' He sent me a hard admonishing look. 'Don't use the mantra before its time.' (56)

As a young girl without knowing the seriousness, she uttered the mantra to the god Surya. She apologizes to him for uttering the Mantra and requests him to go back, but Surya was compelled to fulfill the mantra before returning. Kunti gave birth to the boy baby. It was born with gold earrings and a golden shield on the chest. "*Two earrings and a baby's vest. Made of burnished gold. A father's present. The promise of immortality. A gift from god.*" (73). Secretly, she abandoned her child in a basket in a river. The child is later found and adopted by a charioteer and his wife and named him as Karna. He becomes an important character in Mahabharata. The ambiguous emotions Karna felt about his biological mother Kunti play an important role in Mahabharata.

Kunti chooses Pandu in her swayamwara who is born in ancient illustrious clan of Bharata, the son of Vichitravirya. He has fallen in love and married the man who is sick and suffering from ill health. To her shock soon after their marriage Pandu was married to Madri for political affair. He was got cursed by sage Kindama that he would die if he consummate his marriage. Even before he was got cursed, he could rarely make love to her and she could never have his children. The curse filled Kunti with great pain and disgust. But she still loved him and accept him with all flaws whatever he had.

Then Pandu repeated the dying man's last words to me. 'The fruit of this act must be yours... You brought me grief when I was happy. For this, O pitiless man, I curse you. You, too, will feel fervent desire for the woman you love, and you too will die before appeasing it.' (180)

Because of Pandu's hunger for children, Kunti with the help of Vashikaran Mantra she gave birth for 3 children and named them as Yudhishthira (the son of Yama), Bheem (the son of Vayu), Arjuna (son of Indra). Kunti limited herself to three sons, according to shastras one should not have more than three children when the children were not conceived in the usual manner. With the request of Pandu, she shared her mantra with Madri who gave birth to the twins Nakul and Sahadeva. Thus the five Pandavas were born. After the death of Pandu and Madri she returned to Hastinapur after eighteen years. Pandu died by the curse when he is consummating with Madri. Mad with the grief, Madri jumped into the funeral pyre of Pandu. When she returned to Hastinapur, the kauravas doesn't accept the Pandavas as their brothers because they are not their blood relation. They are not born to Pandu but to Kunti and Madri.

Eighteen years ago, I turned my back on Hastinapur's Elephant Gate; now, eighteen days after Pandu's death, I stand outside it. I was a queen then, I am a widow now, bringing home her husband's remains. A widowed queen with sons--- and that, I suspect, will make all the difference. The decision to return has been mine, but it was made with serious misgivings. (225)

It was in the tournament held to showcase the skills of Kuru princess where Kunti see her first born child Karna. She could not able to show her love to Karna or to confess his birth secret when Karna was insulted by his own brothers Pandavas. Karna has got insulted in many places even in the swayamwar of Draupadi for being the Charioteer's son, a Suta-putra.

To her blow, in the war of Kurushestra Karna has defeated by his own brothers. After the death of Karna, Kunti confesses the birth of Karna to the Pandavas.

He is alive. How will the Pandavas react when they learn who he really is? They will not see a thing beyond what is obvious to all: a sutaputra. They will not be able to love down the shame of it. It has taken us years to make a place in Hastinapur, and nothing is settled yet... I must not put my sons' future in peril. One false step and I will pull everyone with me deeper into this quicksand... He is Anga-rajah now, a ruler in his own right, but Yudhishthira and his brothers are still dependant on their uncle. The past cannot be retrieved. No reparation. No repair. (263)

The secret she kept all those years to protect her sons, by its revelation it drawn a rift between them. Kunti become mystery to his own sons, they does not know how to behave with their mother when they come to know that Karna was their eldest brother. After the war, Kunti decided to leave Hastinapur and go to forest with Dhritarastra and Gandhari. No one ill treated or banished her form the palace, for rehabilitation and rebuilding she exile herself to the forest.

Kunti as a woman stands apart from all the other characters in Mahabharata. She is a strong motherly character who raises herself from all hardships, challenges and struggles. This paper tries to explore the feministic portrayal of Kunti as a woman destined to live in a predicament-ridden life in Madhavi S. Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas*.

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