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Discovering Women as Symbols of Family and Nation in S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*

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Abstract

S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* reinterprets the Mahabharata by humanizing its characters and stripping away mythological idealism. In this reconstruction, women such as Gandhari, Satyawati, Kunti, and Draupadi emerge not merely as individuals but as symbolic embodiments of family structures and proto-national consciousness. Their bodies, choices, silences, and sufferings become sites where lineage, legitimacy, power, and continuity are negotiated. This paper argues that Bhyrappa transforms these women into living metaphors for both the family and the nation. They sustain dynasties, absorb social contradictions, and silently bear the burden of political and moral collapse. Through close reading of their dialogues, the study reveals how these women function as symbolic centres of stability, resistance, and continuity, even as they are subjected to exploitation and control within societal frameworks.

Key Words: Family, Nation, Reconstruction, Reinterpretation, Women

Introduction

The Mahabharata stands as one of the most profound and enduring texts of Indian civilization, functioning not only as an epic narrative but also as a repository of ethical, social, and philosophical thought. It presents a complex interplay of dharma (righteousness), kinship,



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power, and human emotion, offering insights into the structures that governed early Indian society. Within this vast narrative, women occupy a position of deep symbolic and functional importance. They are not merely participants in the unfolding of events but serve as essential anchors of lineage, custodians of familial continuity, and silent bearers of social and moral responsibility. In classical interpretations, characters such as Gandhari, Kunti, Satyawati, and Draupadi have often been viewed through the lens of idealized womanhood embodying virtues such as chastity, devotion, sacrifice, and endurance. These portrayals, while affirming the cultural value placed on feminine strength, sometimes obscure the inner conflicts, agency, and complex subjectivities of these women. Modern retellings and reinterpretations of the Mahabharata seek to revisit these figures, not to challenge the sanctity of the epic, but to deepen our understanding of its human and social dimensions.

It is within this interpretative tradition that S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* assumes great significance. By stripping away supernatural elements and reimagining the epic in a historically grounded, human framework, Bhyrappa offers a narrative that foregrounds the lived realities of its characters. His approach does not diminish the grandeur of the Mahabharata rather, it enriches it by presenting its characters as psychologically complex individuals navigating the constraints of their social and familial roles. In doing so, *Parva* aligns with the broader Indian tradition of reinterpreting epics across time, as noted by A. K. Ramanujan, who emphasized that Indian epics exist in 'many tellings', each adding layers of meaning while preserving the core ethos. A crucial dimension of this reinterpretation is the centrality of women in sustaining the structures of both family and society. In the Mahabharata, the family is not merely a private unit but the very foundation of political authority and social organization. The continuity of lineage determines the legitimacy of kingship, the stability of the kingdom, and ultimately the preservation of dharma. Within this framework, women become indispensable, as they are the bearers of lineage, facilitators of alliances, and transmitters of cultural values. Romila Thapar have highlighted that early Indian political formations were deeply rooted in kinship networks, where the boundaries between family and state were fluid and interdependent.

Thus, the role of women extends beyond the domestic sphere into the symbolic realm of what may be understood as proto-national identity. Their bodies, choices, and silences become sites where issues of legitimacy, succession, and power are negotiated. At the same time, their experiences reflect the ethical and emotional dimensions of these processes, revealing the human cost of maintaining social order. Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti have argued that women in such contexts are central to the regulation of lineage and social hierarchy, making them key figures in the construction and preservation of societal structures.



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In *Parva*, Bhyrappa brings this dimension into sharper focus by presenting women not as passive symbols but as active participants in shaping and sustaining these structures, even within the constraints imposed upon them. Gandhari's silence, Satyawati's political foresight, Kunti's moral negotiations, and Draupadi's resilience collectively illustrate the different ways in which women embody the ideals and tensions of both family and nation. Their lives reflect the intricate balance between personal desire and social duty, a balance that lies at the heart of the Mahabharata's exploration of dharma.

Importantly, this study approaches these representations with a culturally affirmative perspective. The aim is not to critique or diminish the epic tradition but to highlight its depth and adaptability. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan observed, Indian epics are dynamic texts that invite reinterpretation and reflection, allowing each generation to engage with their timeless themes in new ways. Bhyrappa's *Parva* can thus be seen as part of this living tradition, offering insights that resonate with contemporary concerns while remaining rooted in the philosophical foundations of Indian culture. This paper, therefore, seeks to explore how Bhyrappa's portrayal of Gandhari, Satyawati, Kunti, and Draupadi positions them as symbolic embodiments of both family and nation. Through close textual analysis supported by historical and feminist perspectives, it argues that these women function as the sustaining force of the Kuru lineage and, by extension, the broader social order. Their roles, while shaped by patriarchal structures, also reveal agency, resilience, and ethical depth, underscoring the central place of women in the civilizational imagination of India.

Theoretical Framework: Women, Family, and Nation in Indian Thought

A comprehensive understanding of women's roles in S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* requires an interdisciplinary framework that brings together feminist theory, sociological insights on kinship and lineage, and the philosophical foundations of Indian thought. Rather than imposing external frameworks in isolation, this study adopts a dialogic approach placing Western feminist concepts in conversation with indigenous Indic perspectives. This enables a more balanced and culturally sensitive interpretation of Gandhari, Satyawati, Kunti, and Draupadi as symbolic embodiments of family and proto-national identity.

Women, Kinship, and the Structure of Society

In early Indian society, kinship functioned as the primary organizing principle of both social and political life. The family or lineage was not merely a domestic unit but the foundation upon which authority, inheritance, and governance were built. As Romila Thapar (2002) observes, early state formation in India was deeply intertwined with lineage structures, where the legitimacy of rulers depended on genealogical continuity. Within this framework, women occupied a central, though often understated, position. They were the bearers of lineage, the



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facilitators of alliances through marriage, and the transmitters of cultural and ethical values across generations. Their roles ensured the stability and continuity of the social order, making them indispensable to both family and state. Uma Chakravarti (2003) further argues that women's sexuality and reproductive capacity were closely regulated to maintain lineage purity and social hierarchy. While this highlights structural constraints, it simultaneously underscores the centrality of women to the very existence of the system. In *Parva*, this duality is evident, women are shaped by the structures they inhabit, yet they also sustain and influence those structures in significant ways.

Feminist Perspectives: Voice, Silence, and Agency

Feminist theory provides valuable tools for analysing how women's experiences are represented, particularly in relation to voice, silence, and agency. However, it is important to approach these frameworks with cultural sensitivity, recognizing that expressions of agency may differ across contexts. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) raises the critical question, "Can the subaltern speak?" highlighting how marginalized voices are often constrained by dominant discourses. In the context of *Parva*, Gandhari's silence can be interpreted through this lens not as absence of voice, but as a mode of expression shaped by circumstance. Her silence carries meaning, reflecting both resistance and introspection. Similarly, Judith Butler (1990) conceptualizes gender as performative, suggesting that identity is constructed through repeated social practices. The roles performed by Gandhari, Kunti, Satyawati, and Draupadi whether as wives, mothers, or queens can thus be understood as part of a broader social script. Yet, within these roles, Bhyrappa reveals moments of negotiation and subtle assertion, indicating that agency operates even within constraints. Importantly, Indian feminist scholars such as Nivedita Menon (2012) emphasize that agency should not be viewed solely in terms of overt rebellion. In many contexts, it manifests through endurance, negotiation, and ethical decision-making. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Parva*, where women's strength often lies in their ability to sustain family and uphold dharma under challenging circumstances.

Indic Philosophical Perspectives: Dharma, Shakti, and Stri Dharma

To fully appreciate Bhyrappa's portrayal, it is essential to situate it within the philosophical traditions of India. The concept of *dharma* lies at the heart of the Mahabharata, representing not just duty but a complex moral order that governs individual and collective life. Women in the epic are deeply engaged with dharma, often navigating its complexities in ways that reveal both its demands and its ambiguities. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (2008) describes dharma as a dynamic principle that adapts to context, requiring individuals to make difficult moral choices. In *Parva*, Kunti's decisions, Gandhari's silence, and Draupadi's



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resilience all reflect this dynamic engagement with dharma. Equally significant is the concept of *Shakti*, which positions the feminine as a source of power, creation, and endurance. Within Indian cultural thought, women are not merely passive recipients of roles but embodiments of energy that sustains the universe. This perspective allows for a more affirmative reading of Bhyrappa's characters, recognizing their strength not only in moments of assertion but also in their capacity for patience, sacrifice, and moral clarity. The idea of Stri Dharma, the inherent nature of womanhood further emphasizes qualities such as compassion, resilience, and adaptability. While these attributes have sometimes been used to confine women to certain roles, they can also be understood as sources of strength that enable them to sustain both family and society.

Family as Proto-Nation: Symbolic Extension

The transition from family to nation is a key conceptual bridge in this study. In the Mahabharata, the kingdom is essentially an extension of the family, with the ruling dynasty representing the nation. Thus, the stability of the family directly influences the stability of the political order. Women, as central figures within the family, therefore acquire symbolic significance beyond the domestic sphere. Their roles in ensuring lineage continuity, mediating relationships, and upholding ethical values position them as representatives of the larger collective. This idea resonates with broader theoretical discussions on gender and nationhood, where women are often seen as symbolic bearers of cultural identity. However, in the Indian context, this symbolism is deeply rooted in indigenous concepts of land, motherhood, and power, giving it a distinct philosophical and cultural grounding. In *Parva*, Gandhari can be seen as embodying the silent endurance of the nation, Satyawati as its foundational architect, Kunti as its moral conscience, and Draupadi as its dynamic and persistent spirit. Together, they represent different dimensions of the collective identity, illustrating how the personal and the political are intricately connected.

Bhyrappa's Realism as Interpretative Method

Finally, Bhyrappa's narrative approach itself forms an important part of the theoretical framework. By removing supernatural elements and focusing on human motivations, he invites readers to engage with the epic as a social and historical text. This approach aligns with what A. K. Ramanujan described as the plurality of epic traditions, where each retelling offers new insights while remaining connected to the original narrative. Bhyrappa's realism does not negate the spiritual or cultural significance of the Mahabharata rather, it complements it by highlighting the human experiences that underlie its timeless themes. Through this lens, the actions and choices of women in *Parva* can be understood not as deviations from tradition but as deep explorations of its ethical and social dimensions.



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By integrating feminist theory, sociological insights, and Indic philosophy, this framework allows for a nuanced understanding of women in *Parva*. It recognizes their structural centrality in sustaining lineage and society, their agency within constraints, expressed through silence, endurance, and decision-making, their symbolic role as embodiments of family and proto-national identity. This multidimensional approach ensures that the analysis remains both academically rigorous and culturally respectful, aligning with the broader aim of the study to reveal the depth, complexity, and enduring relevance of women's roles in the Mahabharata tradition as reimagined by Bhyrappa.

Gandhari: Moral Endurance and the Silent Strength of the Nation

In S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, Gandhari emerges as one of the most profound embodiments of moral endurance, representing not only the power and strength of the individual woman but also the silent resilience of the familial and proto-national structure she inhabits. Her character, far from being a passive symbol of sacrifice, reflects a deeply layered engagement with dharma, agency, and identity. Through her silence, restraint, and introspection, Gandhari becomes a symbolic representation of a nation that sustains itself through inner strength, even amidst sufferings and fragmentation. At the core of Gandhari's characterization lies her act of self-blindfolding, traditionally interpreted as an expression of devotion to her husband. However, in *Parva*, this act is recontextualized as an impulsive yet meaningful response to a forced marriage, "I tore a strip impulsively... 'If you insist on giving me away in marriage to that blind fellow, I shall never set my eyes on him.'" (921)

This moment reveals Gandhari's initial assertion of agency. Her act is not merely symbolic of sacrifice but rooted in a personal sense of dignity and resistance. Yet, as the narrative progresses, this act is absorbed into the larger of social framework and reinterpreted by others as a sign of ideal wifely duties. This transformation reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) identifies as the appropriation of women's actions within dominant narratives, where their original intent is often overshadowed by imposed meanings. Gandhari herself becomes acutely aware of this process of glorification, "Bhishma and others crowned me as a goddess... 'She has sacrificed her sight... The land where she lives will overflow with wealth...' How they heaped praise... and built a legend round me!" (922)

Her reflection exposes the mechanism through which individuals are transformed into symbols. While such glorification aligns with the Indian cultural tradition of venerating feminine sacrifice, Bhyrappa presents Gandhari as consciously negotiating this identity. Importantly, this portrayal does not diminish the cultural value of such ideals but rather deepens our understanding of the human experience behind them. Her silence in response to being called a "goddess" (732) is particularly significant. Instead of openly rejecting or



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accepting this identity, Gandhari chooses non-engagement. This silence can be interpreted as a form of moral restraint and inner autonomy, aligning with the Indian ideal of self-regulation. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (2008) suggests, true strength in Indian philosophy often lies in mastery over the self rather than outward assertion. Gandhari's silence thus becomes a manifestation of inner power. At the same time, her private reflections reveal a more complex emotional landscape. Speaking to Krishna, she critically reassesses her own role as mother, "The count of hundred is to the Maharaja's credit... I bore only fourteen sons and a daughter." (919)

This statement challenges the grand narrative of the Kaurava lineage without rejecting it entirely. Gandhari does not deny the cultural importance of lineage instead, she grounds it in lived reality, reminding us that behind epic numbers lie human experiences. This perspective resonates with Romila Thapar (2002), who emphasizes that epic traditions often blend symbolic representation with historical memory. Her anguish becomes more evident in her reflections on motherhood and circumstance, "Irrespective of my own desire, I had to blind-fold myself... give birth to poor quality offspring, and suffer." (930). While the language is stark, it reflects not rejection of motherhood but a deeply personal confrontation with suffering and limitation. Gandhari's comparison with Kunti whom she sees as more fortunate highlights the role of circumstance in shaping outcomes. This aligns with the Mahabharata's broader exploration of dharma as contingent and context-dependent.

Gandhari's relationship with Dhritarashtra further underscores her symbolic role. Her poignant question, "When did you ever hold my hands, Maharaja... don't I know that I have none else but you?" (924) reveals emotional distance within the marital relationship. Yet, despite this, she continues to fulfil her responsibilities, reflecting the enduring strength associated with duties of a married woman. Her endurance does not signify weakness but rather a commitment to sustaining the structure she inhabits. Her silence also extends to moments of deep grief. When asked whether she would forgive the Pandavas, she responds with measured restraint, distinguishing between personal sorrow and collective loss. This ability to contextualize grief reflects a broader morality, where individual suffering is integrated into the larger framework of dharma.

A particularly significant moment occurs when Gandhari expresses her desire to see the battlefield, "I am itching to try to see how a battlefield looks with my own eyes." (933). This statement marks a shift from imposed blindness to a conscious desire for perception. It symbolizes an awakening an urge to confront reality directly. Yet, when she later returns to blindness, she accepts it with calm introspection, "I shall be blind as before... This gives me a kind of mental peace" (937). This return is not a regression but a deliberate reassertion of



control, transforming blindness into a chosen state of inner equilibrium. In this sense, Gandhari embodies what may be described as the silent strength of the nation a power that endures, adapts, and sustains itself without outward display.

From a broader perspective, Gandhari's character illustrates how women function as symbolic anchors of both family and proto-national identity. Her silence is not emptiness but a space filled with reflection, resilience, and moral and ethical clarity. As Uma Chakravarti (2003) notes, women in such contexts often bear the responsibility of maintaining social continuity, even when their own desires are subordinated. Gandhari exemplifies this role, sustaining the Kuru lineage while quietly engaging with its contradictions. Thus, Gandhari in *Parva* is not merely a figure of suffering but a representation of enduring power one that aligns with the broader ideals of Indian culture while offering a deeper, more human understanding of them. Her silence, far from diminishing her, elevates her as a symbol of moral endurance, inner strength, and the sustaining force of both family and nation.

Satyavati: Continuity, Strategy, and Civilizational Foundations

In S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, Satyavati emerges as a foundational figure whose life and decisions shape the very continuity of the Kuru lineage. She represents the strength of continuity not merely in a biological sense, but as a sustaining force that ensures the survival of lineage, governance, and social order. Far from being a peripheral or morally ambiguous character, Satyavati can be understood as an embodiment of statecraft, where individual choices are aligned with the larger needs of family and civilization. Satyavati's early life itself foregrounds her role as a bearer of lineage. Her encounter with the sage Parashara is described in strikingly physical and immediate terms, "The sage... found her charms irresistible... They reveled in each other's bodies... and impregnated her." (572). While at first glance this episode may appear to reduce her to a passive participant, Bhyrappa's narration instead situates it within the broader social reality where lineage and progeny are of paramount importance. The birth of Vyasa from this union becomes crucial for the continuation of the Kuru dynasty, suggesting that Satyavati's body becomes a site of civilizational continuity.

This idea is reinforced through her father's pragmatic understanding of social realities, "These strangers come, sow their seeds... and the womb is left empty." (573). This metaphor, though stark, reflects an agrarian worldview in which fertility, continuity, and survival are interconnected. Within this framework, Satyavati's role is not diminished but rather elevated, she becomes the medium through which lineage is preserved and extended. Satyavati's later actions further highlight her strategic acumen and commitment to dynastic continuity. Her insistence on securing the throne for her lineage is not driven by personal ambition alone but by an awareness of the necessity of stable succession. Her father told,



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“What shall my daughter gain... unless her son ascends the throne?” (566), which was her wish also. This statement reflects a clear understanding of power structures within the Kuru polity. Satyawati recognizes that without legitimate succession, both family and nation would descend into instability. Her actions, therefore, align with what may be understood as royal obligations, the duty to preserve order and continuity.

From a theoretical perspective, Satyawati’s role resonates with the observations of Romila Thapar (2002), who notes that early Indian polities were deeply rooted in kinship networks, where the preservation of lineage was essential for political legitimacy. Satyawati’s decisions can thus be seen as contributing to the stabilization of these networks. At the same time, her life reflects the gendered realities of this system. As Uma Chakravarti (2003) points out, women’s reproductive roles were central to maintaining lineage and social hierarchy. However, in *Parva*, Satyawati is not merely subject to these structures, she actively navigates and shapes them. Her decisions demonstrate a form of agency that operates within, rather than outside, the social framework. Her role as a bridge between generations becomes particularly significant when viewed in the context of the Kuru dynasty’s crisis. By ensuring the birth of heirs through Vyasa, Satyawati safeguards the continuity of the lineage at a moment when it faces extinction. This act, often interpreted through the lens of *niyoga*, reflects not moral compromise but a culturally sanctioned practice aimed at preserving the family and, by extension, the nation.

Bhyrappa’s portrayal thus encourages a reinterpretation of Satyawati’s pragmatism. Rather than viewing her actions as manipulative or self-serving, they can be understood as deeply aligned with the collective good. Her life exemplifies the hard choices required to sustain civilization, where personal desires are often subordinated to larger social responsibilities. In this sense, Satyawati embodies the foundational strength of the nation, she is the origin point from which the Kuru lineage derives its continuity and legitimacy. Her presence underscores the idea that the stability of the political order is inseparable from the strength of its familial structures, and that women, as central figures within these structures, play a decisive role in shaping history. Thus, in *Parva*, Satyawati stands not merely as a character within the narrative but as a symbolic representation of civilizational endurance. Her life reflects the intricate interplay between personal experience and collective necessity, illustrating how women function as vital agents in the preservation and transmission of both family and nation.

Kunti: Dharma, Responsibility, and the Burden of Legitimacy

In S. L. Bhyrappa’s *Parva*, Kunti emerges as a figure of profound moral complexity, embodying the intricate interplay between personal experience and social responsibility. She



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represents not only motherhood but also the burden of legitimacy, making her a crucial symbolic link between family continuity and the moral foundations of the nation. Through her life, Bhyrappa explores how dharma is not a fixed code but a dynamic and often painful negotiation shaped by circumstance. A central tension in Kunti's characterization lies in the question of lineage and legitimacy. The accusation directed at her sons, "None of the Pandavas was born to their father." (47), reveals the fragility of genealogical claims upon which dynastic authority rests. In a society where lineage determines political legitimacy, Kunti's motherhood becomes a site of scrutiny and contestation. Yet, rather than undermining the epic's values, this tension highlights the complexity of dharma, where biological and social truths do not always align neatly.

Kunti herself is acutely aware of the structures within which she operates. Reflecting on the institution of marriage, she observes, "They picked daughters-in-law as if they were young cows or buffaloes..." (49) This striking comparison underscores the social reality in which women are often viewed in terms of their reproductive potential. However, Bhyrappa's portrayal does not reduce Kunti to this condition, instead it reveals her awareness and her ability to navigate these constraints with dignity and resilience. Her strength lies in her capacity to uphold familial stability despite these limitations. Her silence regarding Karna constitutes one of the most significant aspects of her character. She confesses, "I should have denied it, buried it forever in my belly." (508). This statement reflects the heavy burden of hidden truth that Kunti carries throughout her life. Her decision to conceal Karna's identity is not merely a personal choice but one shaped by the demands of social order and the preservation of her sons' legitimacy. In this sense, her silence becomes an act of protection of both family and political stability. From a theoretical perspective, Kunti's situation resonates with the insights of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who highlights how women's voices are often constrained within dominant structures. Yet, Kunti's silence is not a sign of absence but of ethical deliberation, reflecting her engagement with the difficult demands of dharma.

Her life also illustrates what Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan describes as the contextual nature of dharma, where moral decisions are shaped by situations rather than rigid rules. Kunti's choices whether in invoking divine intervention for progeny or in managing the truth about Karna demonstrate her difficult to balance personal emotion with social responsibility. Moreover, Kunti's role as mother extends beyond biological reproduction to the moral shaping of her sons. She instils in them values of unity, duty, and perseverance, thereby contributing to the ethical foundation of the Pandava lineage. In this sense, she functions as a moral anchor, ensuring that the family and by extension, the nation remains aligned with dharmic principles. Thus, Kunti in *Parva* symbolizes the burden of legitimacy and the power



of ethical endurance. Her life reflects the hard realities of sustaining lineage within a complex social framework, highlighting the central role of women in maintaining both familial and political stability.

Draupadi: Unity, Dignity, and the Living Consciousness of the Nation

Draupadi, in *Parva*, stands as the most dynamic and visibly expressive among the female characters, embodying the living consciousness of the nation. She represents not only unity and dignity but also the strength of awareness and resistance. Through her experiences, Bhyrappa presents a figure who both sustains and challenges the structures she inhabits, making her a powerful symbol of collective identity. Her marriage to the five Pandavas is one of the most striking aspects of her characterization, “We five shall jointly marry the girl we won yesterday.” (218) While unconventional, this arrangement serves a larger purpose it ensures the unity of the Pandavas, preventing division and conflict among them. Draupadi thus becomes the binding force that holds the family together, symbolizing the principle of unity in diversity that underlies the idea of the nation.

However, this role comes with immense personal sacrifice. Reflecting on her life, she states, “I was the one who bore their hunger and bore their children, completely run down.” (225). This acknowledgment reveals the physical and emotional toll of her situation. Draupadi’s body becomes the site through which familial unity is maintained, reflecting the broader idea of the nation sustained through the labour and endurance of its people. The most defining moment of Draupadi’s life the disrobing episode exposes the vulnerability of dignity within a corrupted social order, “He seized my... saree... ‘you are now a servant-woman.’” (245). This act represents not only personal humiliation but also a breakdown of dharma within the court. Draupadi’s question to the elders, and their silence, highlights the failure of moral authority. Yet, her response to this incident marks a turning point in her character, “As long as a woman has faith in the decency of men, she will not gain strength.” (245) This realization signifies an awakening a movement from dependence to self-awareness. Draupadi’s strength lies not merely in her endurance but in her capacity to question and reinterpret her situation.

From a theoretical standpoint, Draupadi’s transformation aligns with Judith Butler’s idea of agency emerging within and through social constraints. Draupadi does not step outside her role rather, she redefines it through her consciousness and assertion. Her character also reflects the concept of power in Indian thought. Unlike Gandhari’s inward strength or Kunti’s moral power, Draupadi’s ability is outward and dynamic. She engages directly with the world, confronting injustice and asserting her dignity. In doing so, she embodies the awakened nation one that is aware of its rights and prepared to defend them. Scholarly perspectives further



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support this reading. Alf Hildebeitel (2001) notes that Draupadi's role in the epic is central to its ethical and narrative development, as her experiences catalyse the events leading to the war. In *Parva*, this role is deepened, with greater emphasis on her psychological and emotional dimensions. Thus, Draupadi represents the living consciousness of the nation dynamic, resilient, and self-aware. Her life reflects both the challenges and the power inherent in sustaining dignity and unity within a complex social order.

Women as Symbols of Family and Nation

Across the characters of Gandhari, Satyawati, Kunti, and Draupadi in S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, a coherent and deeply meaningful symbolic pattern emerges one that situates women at the very centre of both familial and proto-national structures. These figures are not isolated individuals rather, they represent interconnected dimensions of social and civilizational continuity. Through their lives, Bhyrappa articulates a nuanced understanding of how the family functions as the foundational unit of the nation (*rashtra*), and how women serve as its sustaining power. Each of these women embodies a distinct yet complementary aspect of this symbolic framework. Gandhari as moral strength and restraint, Gandhari's silence and self-imposed blindness represent not merely personal sacrifice but a deeper morality rooted in self-regulation and endurance. Her ability to internalize suffering while maintaining dignity reflects the stability required for the sustenance of both family and society. She symbolizes the inward strength of a nation that survives through resilience and moral introspection. Satyawati as Continuity and political foresight, Satyawati stands as the architect of dynastic continuity. Her decisions, often shaped by pragmatic considerations, ensure the survival of the Kuru lineage. In her, we see the embodiment of rajyadharma, where personal choices are aligned with the larger needs of governance and social order. She represents the foundational power that initiates and preserves civilizational continuity.

Kunti as ethical complexity and responsibility, Kunti's life reflects the intricate nature of dharma, where moral decisions are shaped by context and consequence. Her role as mother and moral guide underscores the importance of ethical responsibility in sustaining lineage. She symbolizes the inner conflict and discernment required to uphold both familial and social stability. Draupadi as unity, dignity, and resilience Draupadi embodies the dynamic and conscious aspect of the nation. Her role in uniting the Pandavas, coupled with her insistence on dignity and justice, positions her as a symbol of collective consciousness. She represents the power that not only sustains unity but also challenges injustice, ensuring that the moral fabric of society remains intact. Together, these four figures create a holistic representation of the ideals embedded in Indian culture. Their lives illustrate that women are not peripheral to the functioning of society but are, in fact, its



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central pillars. They sustain lineage, uphold dharma, mediate relationships, and embody the moral and emotional core of the community.

Conclusion

In *Parva*, women emerge as the foundational pillars of both family and nation, embodying the intricate balance between personal experience and collective responsibility. Through the lives of Gandhari, Satyawati, Kunti, and Draupadi, Bhyrappa presents a richly layered narrative that highlights the indispensable role of women in sustaining the social and moral fabric of civilization. Gandhari's silence reflects moral endurance and the power of inward reflection, Satyawati's foresight ensures the continuity of lineage and governance, Kunti's life reveals the complexities of dharma and the burden of ethical responsibility, and Draupadi's resilience embodies dignity, unity, and consciousness. Together, these figures form a powerful and cohesive representation of strength not as dominance, but as the capacity to sustain, adapt, and uphold values in the face of adversity.

Importantly, Bhyrappa's reinterpretation does not challenge the traditional values of the Mahabharata. Instead, it revitalizes them by presenting these characters in their full human depth, allowing readers to engage more intimately with their struggles and strengths. As A. K. Ramanujan suggests, the richness of Indian epics lies in their plurality of tellings, each offering new insights while remaining rooted in the original ethos. *Parva* stands as one such meaningful retelling that enhances our appreciation of the epic's enduring relevance. Furthermore, this portrayal aligns with the philosophical vision articulated by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who viewed Indian cultural texts as dynamic sources of ethical reflection. In this light, Bhyrappa's work can be seen as a continuation of a living tradition one that invites reinterpretation while affirming the core values of dharma, responsibility, and social harmony.

Thus, women in *Parva* are not merely characters within a narrative, they are symbols of civilization itself. They embody the power that sustains lineage, nurtures relationships, and guides the moral direction of society. Their lives reveal that the strength of a nation lies not only in its political structures but in the resilience, wisdom, and ethical commitment of those who uphold its foundational values. In recognizing this, *Parva* offers a perspective that is both rooted in tradition and responsive to contemporary understanding affirming that the enduring power of Indian civilization resides in the balanced integration of individual experience and collective well-being, with women at its very heart.

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