

The Mother-Child Relationship in the Mahabharata: Bonds, Conflicts, and Societal Reflections

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ABSTRACT

The Mahabharata, one of the longest epics in world literature, offers profound insights into human relationships, particularly the mother-child bond. This paper explores the multifaceted portrayals of motherhood in the epic, examining key figures such as Kunti, Gandhari, and Madri, and their interactions with their offspring. Through a literary analysis informed by feminist and psychoanalytic perspectives, it argues that these relationships reflect broader themes of duty (dharma), sacrifice, and the patriarchal constraints of ancient Indian society. The study highlights how maternal figures navigate personal desires against societal expectations, often leading to tragic outcomes. By dissecting specific episodes, the paper illuminates the epic's commentary on familial dynamics and their enduring relevance to contemporary discussions on gender and kinship structure.

KEYWORDS

Mahabharata, motherhood, Kunti, Gandhari, dharma, patriarchy

1. Introduction

The Mahabharata, attributed to the sage Vyasa and composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE, is not merely a tale of war and heroism but a rich tapestry of interpersonal relationships that mirror the complexities of human existence. Central to its narrative are the mother-child relationships, which serve as pivotal elements in driving the plot and exploring ethical dilemmas. Mothers in the epic are depicted as embodiments of nurturing, yet they are also agents of fate, burdened by secrets, curses, and societal norms.

This paper aims to frame the mother-child bond within the context of the epic's overarching themes. It focuses on prominent examples: Kunti's relationships with her sons, including the abandoned Karna; Gandhari's devotion to her hundred sons, the Kauravas; and ancillary figures like Madri and Ganga. The analysis draws on textual evidence from the Sanskrit epic, as translated by scholars such as Kisari Mohan Ganguli and Bibek Debroy, to underscore how these bonds influence the characters' destinies and the epic's moral philosophy.



The research question guiding this study is, “How do the portrayals of mother-child relationships in the Mahabharata reflect and critique the interplay between individual agency and societal dharma?” By addressing this, the paper contributes to Indological studies and gender scholarship, revealing the epic's nuanced portrayal of motherhood beyond stereotypical reverence.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in close textual analysis of the Mahabharata. Primary Sources include the critical edition by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and English translations for accessibility. Key episodes are selected based on their centrality to mother-child themes; the Adi Parva for origins, Sabha and Vana Parvas for developments, and Udyoga and Bhishma Parvas for climactic revelations.

Theoretical frameworks include feminist theory to interrogate gender roles and psychoanalytic theory to unpack emotional undercurrents. Limitations include the epic's oral origins, which may introduce interpretive variances, and the reliance on translations, potentially losing Sanskrit nuances.

Scholarly discourse on the Mahabharata has evolved from philological analyses to interdisciplinary approaches. Early works, such as those by Georges Dumézil (1968), emphasized mythological structures, viewing mothers as archetypal figures in Indo-European lore. Feminist critiques, notably by Iravati Karve in *Yuganta* (1969), reinterpret female characters like Kunti as pragmatic survivors in a male-dominated world, highlighting their strategic use of motherhood. Psychoanalytic perspectives, as in Sudhir Kakar's *The Inner World* (1978), explore the oedipal undertones in relationships like Kunti-Karna, where abandonment and reunion evoke themes of guilt and redemption.

More recent studies, such as those in Alf Hiltebeitel's 'The Ritual of Battle' (1976) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's retellings (e.g., *The Palace of Illusions*, 2008), examine motherhood through postcolonial and gender lenses, critiquing how patriarchal norms amplify maternal suffering. This paper builds on these foundations by synthesizing literary, feminist, and cultural analyses, filling a gap in focused examinations of mother-child dynamics across multiple characters. It avoids reductionist views, instead emphasizing the epic's polyphonic nature, where mothers are both victims and influencers of fate.

3. Kunti: The Archetypal Mother of Sacrifice and Secrecy

Kunti, one of the most enigmatic and multifaceted maternal figures in the Mahabharata, embodies the archetypal mother whose life is defined by profound sacrifices and burdensome secrets. Born as Pritha to King Shurasena and adopted by Kuntibhoja, her journey into motherhood begins with a divine boon granted by the sage Durvasa. This boon, allowing her to invoke any deity to conceive a child, sets the stage for her complex relationships with her offspring (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, Adi Parva, sec. 111-112, trans. Ganguli). Kunti's portrayal transcends simplistic notions of nurturing motherhood, instead revealing a woman navigating the treacherous intersections of personal desire, societal expectations, and dharma (righteous duty). Through her interactions with her sons—Karna, Yudhishtira, Bhima,

Arjuna, and her adoptive role with Nakula and Sahadeva—the epic illustrates themes of abandonment, guilt, favoritism, and redemption. This analysis delves into these dynamics, drawing on feminist and psychoanalytic lenses to unpack how Kunti's motherhood critiques patriarchal structures in ancient Indian society, while highlighting her agency amid constraints. Kunti's maternal narrative commences with an act of youthful curiosity that spirals into lifelong tragedy: the premarital conception and abandonment of Karna. Eager to test Durvasa's boon, the unmarried Kunti invokes Surya, the sun god, resulting in Karna's birth. Terrified of societal ostracism in a rigidly patriarchal world where a woman's chastity defined her worth, she places the infant in a basket and sets him adrift on the Ganges River (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 104-111, trans. Ganguli). This episode is not merely a plot device but a profound commentary on the burdens of unintended motherhood. From a feminist perspective, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's exploration of women's objectification as vessels of honor in patriarchal systems, Kunti's abandonment reflects the commodification of female bodies (de Beauvoir 301-02). Her body, empowered by the boon, becomes a site of conflict; the same agency that grants her divine progeny also exposes her to shame. Psychoanalytically, drawing from Sigmund Freud's theories of repression, this act signifies Kunti's suppression of maternal instincts to preserve her social identity (Freud 245-50). The guilt manifests later as a haunting secret, fracturing her psyche and foreshadowing the epic's central conflict—the Kurukshetra War, where Karna fights against his unbeknownst brothers. The abandonment's repercussions ripple through Kunti's life, underscoring secrecy as a defining trait of her motherhood. Karna, raised by the charioteer Adhiratha and his wife Radha, grows into a formidable warrior plagued by identity crises (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 126-127, trans. Debroy 1: 456-60). Kunti's silence about his parentage is a deliberate sacrifice, ostensibly to protect her sons' unity and her own reputation, but it breeds resentment and tragedy. In the *Udyoga Parva*, during peace negotiations, Kunti reveals the truth to Karna in a poignant encounter, urging him to join the Pandavas. Karna's refusal, rooted in loyalty to Duryodhana, highlights the irreversible damage of her secrecy: "You discarded me... you destroyed me in a way that no enemy could ever do to him" (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Udyoga Parva*, sec. 139, trans. Debroy 5: 312). This moment is laden with emotional depth: Kunti's plea evokes maternal desperation, yet Karna's response exposes the wound. Feminist scholars like Iravati Karve interpret this as Kunti's pragmatic survival strategy in a male-dominated world, where revealing the secret earlier could have jeopardized her marriage and status (Karve 45-52). However, it also critiques the patriarchal devaluation of illegitimate children, positioning Karna as a symbol of marginalized identities. Kunti's secrecy, thus, is not passive but an active negotiation of power, where withholding truth becomes a tool for familial preservation, albeit at the cost of personal torment. Transitioning to her legitimate motherhood, Kunti's marriage to Pandu marks a shift toward structured sacrifice. Cursed with

impotence, Pandu urges Kunti to use her boon for progeny. She invokes Yama for Yudhishtira (embodying dharma), Vayu for Bhima (strength), and Indra for Arjuna (skill). Later, she shares the boon with co-wife Madri, who bears Nakula and Sahadeva from the Ashvins (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 122-123, trans. Ganguli). Kunti's role extends beyond biological motherhood; after Pandu's death and Madri's sati, she becomes the sole guardian of all five Pandavas, raising them through exile and adversity. This collective motherhood exemplifies sacrifice: Kunti endures forest hardships in the *Vana Parva*, foraging and protecting her sons from dangers like the demon Hidimba (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Vana Parva*, sec. 1-10, trans. Debroy 3: 45-78). Her devotion is unwavering, yet laced with favoritism—particularly toward Arjuna, whom she grooms as the ideal warrior. In the *Draupadi swayamvara* episode, Kunti's inadvertent command to share the bride among the brothers stems from her commitment to unity, sacrificing individual desires for collective harmony (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 190, trans. Ganguli). Psychoanalytically, this favoritism may stem from subconscious projections; Arjuna, born of Indra, represents Kunti's unfulfilled ambitions in a world denying women direct power. Her bond with Yudhishtira is intellectual, guiding his adherence to dharma, while with Bhima it's protective, shielding his impulsive nature. These varied dynamics illustrate motherhood as adaptive, molded by each child's divine essence and societal role. Kunti's sacrifices peak during the epic's climactic phases, revealing her as a strategic maternal force. In the *Sabha Parva*, after Yudhishtira's dice loss, Kunti remains in Hastinapura, ostensibly as a guest but effectively as a spy, gathering intelligence for her exiled sons (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Sabha Parva*, sec. 60-70, trans. Debroy 2: 210-35). This self-imposed separation is a profound act of love, prioritizing their safety over her comfort. During the war, her revelation to Karna is a desperate bid for reconciliation, but his death at Arjuna's hands amplifies her grief. The *Stri Parva* depicts Kunti mourning all her sons, including Karna, whose identity she finally discloses to the Pandavas, urging forgiveness (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Stri Parva*, sec. 25-27, trans. Debroy 9: 150-60). This posthumous honesty underscores redemption's theme: Kunti's secrecy, once a shield, becomes a catalyst for ethical reflection. From a broader societal lens, her story mirrors Vedic and post-Vedic norms where mothers were revered as *matri-shakti* (maternal power) yet confined by patrilineal inheritance and purity codes. The *Mahabharata*, through Kunti, critiques these by portraying the psychological toll—her ascetic retreat post-war symbolizes withdrawal from a world that demanded endless sacrifice. In synthesizing these elements, Kunti emerges as the archetypal mother whose sacrifices and secrets propel the *Mahabharata*'s moral complexity. Her relationships reflect the epic's polyphonic nature: love intertwined with betrayal, agency curtailed by dharma. Feminist readings affirm her resilience, transforming victimhood into subtle influence, while psychoanalytic insights reveal the inner conflicts of repressed emotions. Ultimately, Kunti's motherhood critiques patriarchy's commodification of women, urging a reevaluation of

familial bonds. Her legacy endures, offering timeless insights into the sacrifices mothers make, often in silence, to shape destinies.

4. Gandhari: Blind Devotion and the Curse of Motherhood

Gandhari, the princess of Gandhara and wife of the blind Kuru king Dhritarashtra, stands as a poignant counterpoint to Kunti in the Mahabharata, embodying a motherhood defined by unyielding devotion, self-imposed sacrifice, and eventual vengeful curse. Her narrative arc, from voluntary blindness to the cataclysmic loss of her hundred sons, the Kauravas, illustrates the epic's exploration of maternal love as both a nurturing force and a destructive enabler. Unlike Kunti's secretive pragmatism, Gandhari's bond with her children is characterized by collective indulgence and marital solidarity, often at the expense of moral discernment. This section analyzes Gandhari's motherhood through key episodes, employing feminist critiques to highlight her subjugation within patriarchal structures and psychoanalytic frameworks to unpack the repression and eruption of her maternal emotions. Her story critiques the Vedic ideal of the devoted wife-mother, revealing how such blind loyalty perpetuates familial and societal tragedy. Gandhari's entry into motherhood is marked by extraordinary circumstances that underscore the unnatural burdens placed on women in the epic's patriarchal world. Upon learning of Dhritarashtra's blindness, she blindfolds herself permanently, an act of solidarity symbolizing her commitment to share his affliction (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 110, trans. Ganguli). This self-blinding extends metaphorically to her maternal role, where her devotion blinds her to her sons' flaws. Her pregnancy, granted by a boon from Vyasa after Dhritarashtra's frustration with her barrenness, is protracted and grotesque: lasting over two years, she gives birth to a lump of flesh, which Vyasa divides into one hundred and one pots, yielding the Kauravas and their sister Duhshala (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 114-115, trans. Debroy 1: 378-82). This unnatural conception, contrasting the divine invocations of Kunti's sons, positions Gandhari's motherhood as a product of divine intervention tinged with horror, reflecting the epic's blend of mythology and human frailty.

Feminist scholar Iravati Karve views this as emblematic of women's bodies being manipulated for dynastic continuity, where Gandhari's agency is curtailed by her role as a vessel for patriarchal legacy (Karve, 78-85). Psychoanalytically, inspired by Sudhir Kakar's examination of Indian familial dynamics, the prolonged gestation symbolizes repressed anxieties about fertility and powerlessness in a sightless marriage, where blindness amplifies emotional isolation (Kakar, 112-20). Gandhari's relationship with her sons, particularly the eldest Duryodhana, exemplifies "blind devotion" that borders on enablement, contributing to the Kauravas' moral downfall.

Throughout the epic, she indulges Duryodhana's ambitions, often advising restraint but ultimately yielding to his whims. In the Sabha Parva, during the dice game that leads to

the Pandavas' exile, Gandhari warns Dhritarashtra of the impending doom but fails to curb her son's deceitful actions (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, Sabha Parva, sec. 58-60, trans. Ganguli). Her maternal love manifests as a collective bond with all hundred sons, treating them as an undifferentiated unit, a stark contrast to Kunti's individualized relationships. This collectivism, while portraying Gandhari as the epitome of prolific motherhood, critiques the Vedic emphasis on numerous male heirs for ancestral rites, as seen in her sons' shared flaws of envy and hubris. From a feminist lens, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women's internalization of patriarchal roles, Gandhari's devotion reinforces her subjugation; her blindness, both literal and figurative, prevents her from challenging the male-dominated court, where her voice is often dismissed (de Beauvoir, 456-60). Psychoanalytically, Freud's concept of the superego suggests that Gandhari's indulgence stems from overcompensation for her marital frustrations, projecting unfulfilled desires onto her sons and fostering their entitlement (Freud, 320-25).

The epic further complicates Gandhari's motherhood through her interactions during exile and war preparations, revealing cracks in her devotion. In the Vana Parva, while the Pandavas suffer, Gandhari remains in Hastinapura, torn between loyalty to her husband and sympathy for the Pandavas, whom she regards as kin. She attempts mediation, advising Duryodhana to seek peace, but her pleas are ineffective, highlighting the limits of maternal influence in a warrior society (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, Vana Parva, sec. 250-255, trans. Debroy 3: 678-85). This ineffectuality underscores a key theme: motherhood's power is illusory, confined by dharma that prioritizes marital and filial duties over ethical intervention. Alf Hiltebeitel's ritualistic interpretation posits Gandhari as a sacrificial figure, her blindness akin to a vow that binds her to fate, mirroring the epic's broader motifs of inevitability (Hiltebeitel, 145-52). Yet, her devotion is not entirely passive; in moments like blessing Duryodhana with invulnerability (except his thighs) before the war, she wields maternal power through boons, blending nurture with supernatural agency (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, Udyoga Parva, sec. 192, trans. Ganguli). This act, however, enables his aggression, illustrating how maternal love can perpetuate cycles of violence. The culmination of Gandhari's maternal tragedy occurs in the war's aftermath, where her devotion transforms into a curse, exposing the "curse of motherhood" as unchecked rage.

In the Stri Parva, amidst the battlefield strewn with her slain sons, Gandhari removes her blindfold partially to gaze upon the carnage, her eyes channelling years of pent-up sorrow into a curse upon Krishna. Blaming him for allowing the destruction despite his divine omniscience, she prophesies the end of his Yadava clan, "Thirty-six years from now, you shall die alone... your kin shall perish" (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, Stri Parva, sec. 25, trans. Debroy 9: 142-48). This curse, fulfilled later, marks a rare eruption of agency, where Gandhari transcends her submissive role to wield destructive power. Feminist readings celebrate this as

a subversion of patriarchal norms, where the marginalized mother reclaims voice through malediction, critiquing the gods' indifference to female suffering (Karve 90-95). Psychoanalytically, drawing from Kakar, this outburst represents the release of repressed maternal grief, a cathartic confrontation with the losses inflicted by dharma's rigidities (Kakar, 150-58).

Compared to Kunti's internalized guilt, Gandhari's externalized rage highlights diverse maternal responses to tragedy, enriching the epic's commentary on gender and emotion. In broader synthesis, Gandhari's motherhood reflects the Mahabharata's ambivalent portrayal of devotion as both virtue and vice. Her blindfold symbolizes self-effacement in service of family, yet it blinds her to ethical lapses, leading to the Kauravas' demise. This critiques ancient Indian society's idealization of the pativrata (devoted wife) extended to motherhood, where women's sacrifices sustain but also doom patriarchal structures. Through Gandhari, the epic urges balance between love and discernment, her curse serving as a warning against unchecked loyalty. Her legacy, like Kunti's, endures in modern interpretations, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's retellings, which amplify her inner turmoil (Banerjee Divakaruni, 210-15). Ultimately, Gandhari embodies the curse of motherhood: profound love that, when blinded, invites catastrophe.

4. Draupadi: Motherhood amid Polyandry, Exile, and Tragedy

Draupadi, the fiery princess born from the sacrificial fire of King Drupada and the shared wife of the five Pandava brothers, presents one of the most complex portrayals of motherhood in the Mahabharata. Unlike Kunti's secretive sacrifices or Gandhari's blind devotion, Draupadi's maternal role is shaped by the extraordinary circumstances of her polyandrous marriage, the exigencies of exile, and the brutal aftermath of the Kurukshetra War. As the mother of the Upapandavas - five sons, each fathered by one Pandava she embodies resilience, shared responsibility, and profound loss. Her motherhood is less about nurturing in domestic tranquility and more about survival, moral steadfastness, and the tragic erasure of her lineage.

This analysis examines Draupadi's experiences as a mother through textual episodes, employing feminist perspectives to highlight her agency within patriarchal constraints and psychoanalytic insights to explore the emotional toll of her maternal identity. Draupadi's motherhood begins under the unique arrangement of her marriage, ordained by Kunti's inadvertent command and justified through divine precedent and dharma. After Arjuna wins her in the swayamvara, Kunti instructs her sons to share the prize equally, leading to Draupadi's polyandry (Vyāsa, Mahābhārata, Adi Parva, sec. 190, trans. Ganguli). This union, unconventional even by epic standards, complicates conventional motherhood. To maintain harmony and prevent jealousy, the Pandavas establish a rotational system: each brother enjoys exclusive conjugal rights with Draupadi for one year, during which the others refrain

from intimacy (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 199, trans. Debroy 1: 678-80). Despite this, Draupadi bears five sons, one from each husband, suggesting that conceptions occurred during the initial years in Hastinapura before the full exile or through divine facilitation, as the epic does not detail logistical impossibilities but emphasizes harmony. The sons, collectively known as the Upapandavas or Draupadeyas, are:

1. Prativindhya (son of Yudhishtira, embodying dharma and intellect),
2. Sutasoma (son of Bhima, inheriting strength and valor),
3. Shrutakarma (or Shrutakirti, son of Arjuna, skilled in warfare),
4. Shatanika (son of Nakula, known for beauty and diplomacy),
5. Shrutasena (son of Sahadeva, wise and learned). (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 199-200; *Sabha Parva* references to their upbringing, trans. Debroy 2: 45-50).

These children represent a collective maternal achievement, with Draupadi as the unifying mother figure. Feminist interpretations, such as those in scholarly analyses of Draupadi's polyandry, view this as a subversion of patrilineal norms: her sons bear matronymic significance as "Draupadeyas," foregrounding her identity over individual paternal claims. The arrangement underscores shared paternity as a model of equity, yet it also highlights Draupadi's burden. She must navigate intimacy, pregnancy, and child-rearing amid five husbands, maintaining impartiality to preserve familial unity. Psychoanalytically, drawing from Sudhir Kakar's explorations of Indian kinship, this polyandrous motherhood may reflect repressed tensions of exclusivity, where Draupadi's maternal love is distributed to prevent fragmentation, mirroring the epic's broader theme of unity amid diversity (Kakar, 130-35). During the twelve-year exile in the forest (*Vana Parva*) and the year of incognito living (*Virata Parva*), Draupadi's motherhood takes on a protective, almost warrior-like dimension. The Upapandavas, born before or early in exile, accompany the family through hardships. Draupadi endures physical trials—cooking, foraging, and facing threats—while safeguarding her sons. In one poignant episode, she protects them from dangers, embodying maternal vigilance (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Vana Parva*, various sections on forest life, trans. Ganguli). Her role extends to moral guidance; she instills values of dharma in her children, paralleling Kunti's influence but infused with her own fiery temperament.

Feminist scholars note that Draupadi's motherhood here resists victimization despite her public humiliation in the dice game (*Sabha Parva*), where she questions the assembly's silence on her disrobing; she emerges as a resilient mother who shields her lineage from despair. The most harrowing aspect of Draupadi's motherhood unfolds in the war's aftermath. The Upapandavas, now young warriors, fight valiantly on the Pandava side but meet a tragic end. On the eighteenth night of the war, Ashwatthama, son of Drona, enraged by his father's

death, infiltrates the Pandava camp and massacres the sleeping Upapandavas, mistaking them for the Pandavas themselves (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, Sauptika Parva, sec. 1-8, trans. Debroy 8: 200-220). This nocturnal slaughter, one of the epic's darkest episodes, deprives Draupadi of all five sons in a single act of vengeance. When news reaches her, she mourns deeply but displays extraordinary composure, urging the Pandavas toward justice rather than blind revenge. In the Stri Parva, amid the lamentations of widows, Draupadi's grief is profound yet dignified; she curses Ashwatthama indirectly through her sorrow, and Krishna intervenes to mitigate further calamity (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, Stri Parva, references to maternal losses). This loss underscores the "tragic motherhood" theme. Draupadi, who bore sons to perpetuate the Pandava line, sees her progeny extinguished, symbolizing the futility of war and the collateral suffering of women. From a feminist perspective, her motherhood critiques patriarchal warfare, sons are sacrificed for dynastic honour, leaving mothers bereft (Karve, 120-25). Psychoanalytically, the massacre evokes the ultimate repression of maternal hope, transforming Draupadi's nurturing into enduring sorrow. Unlike Gandhari's curse-born rage or Kunti's guilt-ridden revelations, Draupadi's response integrates grief with ethical restraint, affirming her as a moral exemplar.

Overall, Draupadi's motherhood in the Mahabharata is defined by adaptation to extraordinary circumstances, collective nurturing, and catastrophic loss. It reflects the epic's interrogation of dharma in familial bonds: polyandry enables progeny but exposes vulnerabilities, exile tests resilience, and war annihilates legacy. Through Draupadi, the text portrays motherhood not as idealized devotion but as a site of endurance and ethical complexity, where women bear the heaviest burdens of conflict. Her story, often overshadowed by her roles as wife and queen, reveals a profound maternal dimension: resilient, impartial, and tragically human.

5. Peripheral Mothers and Symbolic Roles

In the vast narrative expanse of the Mahabharata, peripheral maternal figures like Madri and Ganga provide essential counterpoints to the central mothers Kunti and Gandhari, expanding the epic's exploration of motherhood beyond human realms into symbolic and divine dimensions. These characters, though less prominent, embody abstract facets of maternal roles: sacrifice, detachment, and cosmic duty. Madri, as Pandu's second wife and biological mother to the twins Nakula and Sahadeva, exemplifies earthly self-effacement in polygamous structures, while Ganga, the river goddess and mother to Bhishma, represents divine indifference intertwined with fate. Their portrayals broaden the spectrum of motherhood from nurturing to destructive, influenced by overarching dharma and patriarchal norms. This section analyzes these figures through feminist and psychoanalytic lenses, drawing on key episodes to reveal how they symbolize the disposability of women and the

intersection of mythology with human emotion, ultimately critiquing societal constructs of kinship.

Madri's motherhood is brief yet profoundly sacrificial, highlighting the vulnerabilities of women in ancient Indian polygamy. Introduced in the *Adi Parva* as the princess of Madra, Madri is acquired by Pandu through a bride-price paid by Bhima's strength, underscoring her commodification as a marital asset (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 112, trans. Ganguli). Her role in conception mirrors Kunti's but with deference: Kunti shares her boon from Durvasa, allowing Madri to invoke the Ashvin twins for Nakula (embodying beauty and horsemanship) and Sahadeva (wisdom and astrology) (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 122, trans. Debroy 1: 412-15). This act establishes co-motherhood, where Madri's progeny integrates into the Pandava unit, reflecting Vedic ideals of unified lineage despite multiple wives. However, Madri's narrative peaks tragically with Pandu's death from a curse, triggered by his attempt at intimacy with her, violating his impotence vow. In grief and atonement, Madri commits sati, self-immolating on Pandu's pyre, entrusting her young twins to Kunti: "I am the cause of his death; let me follow him" (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 125, trans. Ganguli).

Feminist critiques, such as those by Iravati Karve, interpret Madri's sati as emblematic of patriarchal disposability in a system where wives are ranked (Kunti as senior), Madri's life holds value primarily through her reproductive role, rendering her expendable post-fulfillment (Karve 55-60). This self-sacrifice critiques the glorification of widow immolation in ancient texts, portraying it not as heroic devotion but as internalized oppression, where dharma demands women's erasure for familial continuity. Psychoanalytically, drawing from Sigmund Freud's notions of guilt and the death drive, Madri's act signifies repressed culpability for Pandu's demise, channeling maternal protectiveness into self-destruction to spare Kunti the burden (Freud 278-82). Her motherhood, thus, is symbolic: the twins' survival under Kunti's care illustrates adoptive bonds transcending biology, while Madri's absence underscores the epic's theme of fragmented families. In later parvas, Nakula and Sahadeva's loyalty to their brothers affirms this legacy, but Madri's shadow lingers as a reminder of polygamy's emotional toll. Shifting to the divine sphere, Ganga's motherhood introduces a mythic detachment that contrasts earthly nurturing, symbolizing cosmic imperatives over personal bonds. As the celestial river goddess incarnated on earth, Ganga marries King Shantanu under the condition that he never questions her actions. She bears eight sons—the Vasus cursed to human birth for stealing a cow—but drowns the first seven in her waters to liberate them from the curse, fulfilling a divine pact (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 97-99, trans. Debroy 1: 320-28). When Shantanu intervenes on the eighth, Ganga reveals the truth and departs, leaving the child—Devavrata, later Bhishma—to be raised by his father. This narrative frames Ganga as a mother unbound by human sentiment: her drownings, though

infanticidal, are acts of mercy, expediting the Vasus' return to heaven. Bhishma, spared the full curse, endures a prolonged life of celibacy and duty, his name "terrible" reflecting the weight of his origins. From a feminist perspective, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of women as "other" in mythic constructs, Ganga embodies the dehumanization of divine females: her motherhood is instrumental, serving patriarchal and cosmic orders rather than emotional fulfillment (de Beauvoir 189-95). As a river, she symbolizes fluidity and destruction—nurturing life yet capable of erasure—critiquing how mythology objectifies women as forces of nature, devoid of agency beyond predestined roles. Psychoanalytically, Sudhir Kakar's insights into Indian archetypes view Ganga's detachment as a projection of cultural ambivalences towards motherhood. The drowning evokes primal fears of abandonment, while her revelation to Bhishma represents unresolved oedipal tensions, where the absent mother shapes the son's ascetic path (Kakar, 85-92). Bhishma's lifelong vow of celibacy, taken to enable his father's remarriage, echoes this maternal influence, positioning Ganga as a catalyst for renunciation. Her role broadens the epic's maternal spectrum, blending human emotion—Shantanu's grief—with divine logic, illustrating how cosmic dharma overrides personal bonds.

These peripheral mothers enrich the Mahabharata's thematic tapestry by symbolizing extremes: Madri's earthly sacrifice critiques polygamous disposability, while Ganga's divine detachment highlights mythological detachment. Together, they portray motherhood as a continuum from co-nurturing in human realms to destructive liberation in cosmic ones influenced by curses, boons, and societal norms. Alf Hiltebeitel's ritualistic lens interprets them as sacrificial archetypes, where maternal loss propels heroic destinies: Madri's sati ensures Pandava unity, and Ganga's actions forge Bhishma's invincibility (Hiltebeitel, 210-18). Feminist readings underscore their marginality as a commentary on women's erasure in epic narratives, urging recognition of their symbolic power. Psychoanalytically, they represent repressed facets of the maternal psyche: guilt-driven self-effacement and emotionless duty. In synthesis, Madri and Ganga's roles expand the analysis, showing motherhood's fluidity across human-divine divides. They reflect the epic's moral ambiguity, where maternal acts, though tragic, uphold dharma, offering insights into ancient India's Gendered cosmology. Their stories, though peripheral, are integral, symbolizing the broader burdens women bear in shaping legacies.

6. Thematic Synthesis: Dharma, Patriarchy, and Legacy

The mother-child relationships in the Mahabharata serve as a profound lens through which the epic synthesizes its core themes of dharma (righteous duty), patriarchy, and enduring legacy. Drawing together the portrayals of central figures like Kunti and Gandhari, alongside peripheral mothers such as Madri and Ganga—and extending to Draupadi's unique maternal experiences—the narrative reveals motherhood not as a monolithic ideal but as a

dynamic interplay of sacrifice, agency, and tragedy. These bonds encapsulate the epic's moral ambiguity, where maternal love coexists with betrayal, nurturing with destruction, and personal desires with cosmic imperatives. Through feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks, this synthesis argues that the Mahabharata critiques ancient Indian society's patriarchal structures while affirming motherhood's transformative role in shaping ethical and familial legacies. By examining how dharma constrains and empowers mothers, the epic offers timeless reflections on empathy, karma, and the human condition. At the heart of these relationships lies dharma, the ethical framework that intertwines maternal actions with broader societal and cosmic duties.

Mothers in the epic consistently sacrifice personal happiness for the greater good, often at immense personal cost. Kunti's abandonment of Karna, driven by fear of societal shame, exemplifies this: her secrecy preserves her dharma as a chaste woman and later as a unified Pandava matriarch, yet it sows seeds of fratricidal war (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 104-111, trans. Ganguli). Similarly, Gandhari's blind devotion to her Kaurava sons aligns with her dharma as a *pativrata* (devoted wife), extending marital solidarity to indulgent motherhood, but it enables Duryodhana's *adharma*, culminating in her vengeful curse on Krishna (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Stri Parva*, sec. 25, trans. Debroy 9: 142-48). Draupadi's motherhood, shaped by polyandry, embodies adaptive dharma: her impartial nurturing of the *Upapandavas* during exile upholds familial unity, yet the massacre of her sons by Ashwatthama underscores war's violation of maternal sanctity (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Sauptika Parva*, sec. 1-8, trans. Debroy 8: 200-220). Peripheral figures amplify this theme. Madri's sati fulfills her dharma as a repentant wife, entrusting her twins to Kunti for collective legacy (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 125, trans. Ganguli), while Ganga's drowning of her sons liberates them from curses, prioritizing divine dharma over earthly attachment (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 97-99, trans. Debroy 1: 320-28). This intertwining of motherhood and dharma reflects the epic's polyphonic nature, where righteous duty fosters both harmony and conflict. Feminist scholar Iravati Karve posits that such sacrifices critique Vedic norms, portraying dharma as a double-edged sword that elevates mothers as *matri-shakti* (maternal power) while binding them to self-effacement (Karve, 45-52, 78-85). Psychoanalytically, Sudhir Kakar interprets these acts as repressed emotional conflicts: Kunti's guilt, Gandhari's rage, and Ganga's detachment symbolize the psyche's negotiation with dharma's rigidities, where maternal instincts are sublimated into ethical actions (Kakar, 112-20, 150-58).

Across these figures, dharma humanizes mothers, granting agency in pivotal moments—Kunti's revelations, Gandhari's boon to Duryodhana, Draupadi's calls for justice—yet it often leads to tragic irony, as seen in the annihilation of lineages despite maternal efforts. Patriarchal structures in the Mahabharata amplify these conflicts, objectifying women

through boons, curses, and societal norms that commodify motherhood. The epic's patriarchal framework—rooted in patrilineal inheritance and warrior codes—positions mothers as vessels for progeny, their bodies manipulated by divine interventions. Kunti and Madri's use of the boon reduces them to reproductive tools, with Kunti's premarital conception highlighting chastity's patriarchal valuation (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 122-123, trans. Ganguli). Gandhari's unnatural pregnancy, birthed from a fleshy lump, critiques prolific motherhood as a patriarchal burden, her blindness symbolizing willful ignorance in a male-dominated court (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 114-115, trans. Debroy 1: 378-82). Draupadi's polyandry, while subversive, stems from Kunti's command, reinforcing women's disposability in marital arrangements (Vyāsa, *Mahābhārata*, *Adi Parva*, sec. 190, trans. Ganguli). Ganga's mythic role further objectifies: as a goddess wed for progeny, her detachments underscore how patriarchy mythologizes women as transient forces (de Beauvoir 189-95, 301-02). Yet, the epic subtly critiques these structures by humanizing mothers and granting them narrative agency. Alf Hiltebeitel's ritualistic analysis views maternal figures as pivotal in battle rituals, their curses and boons influencing outcomes and exposing patriarchy's flaws (Hiltebeitel, 145-52, 210-18). For instance, Gandhari's curse and Draupadi's grief challenge divine and royal indifference, while Kunti's strategic secrecy transforms victimhood into influence. This agency reflects matrilineal undercurrents in ancient Indian society evident in the sons' divine maternally-derived attributes within a dominant patrilineal frame, fostering themes of karma where patriarchal excesses invite retribution. Psychoanalytically, Freud's repression theories illuminate how these conflicts manifest: suppressed maternal traumas erupt in revelations and curses; critiquing patriarchy's emotional toll (Freud, 245-50, 320-25). The legacy of these mother-child bonds extends beyond individual tragedies, serving as a microcosm of the epic's moral philosophy and offering lessons on ethical complexity. The relationships foster themes of redemption and empathy: Kunti's posthumous disclosure of Karna urges forgiveness, Gandhari's rage humanizes loss, Draupadi's restraint amid grief exemplifies resilience, Madri's sacrifice ensures unity, and Ganga's actions forge Bhishma's enduring vow. This synthesis mirrors the Mahabharata's ambivalence—love intertwined with betrayal, agency curtailed by fate reflecting karma's cyclical nature, where maternal sacrifices propel rebirth and reflection. In modern retellings, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, these legacies amplify feminist voices, reimagining mothers as agents of change (Banerjee Divakaruni, 210-15). Ultimately, the epic's portrayals urge a re-evaluation of familial bonds, emphasizing empathy in navigating dharma and patriarchy. In conclusion, the thematic synthesis of motherhood in the Mahabharata reveals a rich commentary on human frailty. Dharma and patriarchy shape these bonds into arenas of profound sacrifice and subtle resistance, leaving a legacy of ethical introspection. By humanizing mothers amid cosmic

scales, the epic transcends its ancient origins, offering contemporary insights into gender, kinship, and morality.

7. Conclusion

The mother-child relationships in the Mahabharata transcend mere familial ties, embodying the epic's profound exploration of human frailty, divine order, and the intricate web of ethical imperatives. Through the nuanced portrayals of Kunti's secrecy and calculated sacrifices, Gandhari's blind devotion that veers into destructive enablement, Draupadi's resilient yet tragically annihilated motherhood amid polyandry and war, and the symbolic roles of peripheral figures like Madri's self-effacing sati and Ganga's detached cosmic mercy, the text constructs a multifaceted vision of maternity. These bonds are not idealized sanctuaries of unconditional love but arenas where personal emotions clash with societal expectations, divine boons, curses, and the overarching framework of dharma. The epic critiques patriarchal norms that commodify women's bodies and agency - evident in Kunti's premarital abandonment of Karna, Gandhari's unnatural prolific birth, Draupadi's shared conjugal burdens, and Madri's disposability - while simultaneously affirming motherhood's transformative power to influence destinies, foster unity, and provoke moral reflection. Kunti's guilt-ridden revelations, Gandhari's vengeful curse on Krishna, and Draupadi's dignified grief amid the loss of her Upapandavas illustrate how maternal figures, though constrained, wield subtle yet decisive influence, often at the cost of personal fulfilment. These dynamics remain strikingly relevant in contemporary discourses on gender, family, and ethics. Modern feminist rereading of the Mahabharata position it as a cautionary tale rather than a prescriptive guide, highlighting how patriarchal structures continue to restrict women's value to reproductive and sacrificial roles (Nadig). Kunti's strategic secrecy, for instance, resonates with contemporary discussions of hidden maternal traumas and the burdens of societal shame, while Gandhari's devotion critiques blind loyalty in familial hierarchies. Draupadi's resistance, her questioning of dharma during her disrobing and her composure in loss—serves as a paragon of gender resistance; inspiring analyses of women's agency in oppressive systems (see feminist scholarship on Draupadi). In an era grappling with evolving family structures, polyandrous or blended parenting echoes, and the psychological impacts of generational trauma, the epic's portrayals offer ethical insights: the dangers of unchecked indulgence (as in Gandhari's case), the necessity of empathy in conflict (Draupadi's restraint), and the enduring cost of secrecy (Kunti's legacy).

Parenting discussions today draw parallels, noting how failures in moral guidance mirror the epic's flawed matriarchs, advocating dharma-centric approaches for contemporary challenges (Adikka Channels). Moreover, the Mahabharata's emphasis on karma and redemption underscores timeless lessons on balancing love with discernment, urging modern society to re-evaluate gender roles and familial ethics amid rapid change. Future research

could fruitfully extend this analysis to comparative epics, such as the Ramayana, where motherhood is often more idealized and dutiful (e.g., Kaushalya's nurturing versus Kunti's complexities), revealing contrasts in how the two *itihāsas* portray maternal agency within dharma.

Additionally, examining adaptations in contemporary media, novels like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 'The Palace of Illusions' (focusing on Draupadi's inner world), Kavita Kane's retellings of minor female characters, graphic novels, zines challenging stereotypes, and feminist reinterpretations of Kunti, Gandhari, and Satyawati would illuminate how these ancient maternal figures are reimagined to address modern gender politics and resistance (see gynocentric adaptations and zines like "Oh Nari, So Sanskari!").

Such studies could explore how digital media, feminist literature, and global retellings amplify voices of sacrifice and subversion, bridging ancient wisdom with current ethical debates. Ultimately, the Mahabharata reminds us that maternal bonds, though fraught with conflict, secrecy, loss, and patriarchal constraints, remain foundational to the human narrative. They encapsulate the epic's central truth: that true dharma emerges not from rigid adherence but from the painful navigation of love, duty, and empathy. In portraying mothers as both victims and architects of fate, the text invites ongoing reflection on the enduring power and profound cost—of motherhood across time and cultures.

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