

The Element of Guilt and Moral Responsibility in Madhavi Mahadevan's *The Kaunteyas*



Abstract: As most of the Epics around the world narrate the stories of the 'heroes' and talk about their strength, valour, the wars won, the territories annexed etc, rarely do they focus on the emotional and personal side of the stories. Also, the women characters remain majorly overshadowed by the eccentric male-centricism of these narratives. Keeping this premise in mind, many contemporary Indian English writers sought to revisit, revise, and re-present the story of the ancient epics from sub-altern point of view, which included the women's point of view also. In reference to the contemporary retellings of the Mahabharata, amongst the many writers, Madhavi Mahadevan chose to bring out the perspective of the woman character Kunti in her work. Her novel, *the Kaunteyas*, is a fictional narrative which revolves around the life of Kunti during the course of the Mahabharata, highlighting her struggles and the choices she made in life. As the novel focuses on a woman's point of view, the personal and emotional elements which lay overlooked in Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata gain prominence in the modern retelling. To achieve the desired effect, the motifs of guilt and moral responsibility play major role in highlighting the inner conflicts and struggles that many characters, including Kunti, go through in the novel.

Keywords: sub-altern, guilt, emotions, moral responsibility, female-centric, retelling.

Madhavi Mahadevan is a novelist, short-story writer, translator, editor and famously an author of children's books. Her novel, *The Kaunteyas*, which was first published in the year 2016, is a significant contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata from perspective of the character of Kunti. The novel seeks to present an alternative angle to critically examine the story of the Mahabharata as it foregrounds a woman's perspective, as opposed to the conventional male-centric perspective to the epic narrative. As Mahadevan explains in the Prologue to her novel, "Women's stories are written in water. Passed in silence from mother to daughter... I wonder what would happen if women started telling their own stories. Like water that grinds down the hardest rock, would these stories change the shape of the world?" (2). As the Prologue to the novel focuses on telling the story from a woman's point of view, the areas of focus also change. While conventional male-centric epic narratives focus on attributes like heroism, valour, chivalry, wars etc., the narratives by women would in turn focus on the emotional aspects of the story. To quote Mahadevan, in the Prologue to her novel she lists what women's stories are about, "About things perishable: flesh, blood, feelings, tears. Suffering. Endurance is a sign of womanliness" (2). We see how Mahadevan sets the stage in the Prologue itself, preparing the readers for her novel to begin. As the novel focuses on Kunti as the central figure and narrator of the novel, the axis of the narrative shifts towards her personal and emotional journey, highlighting her struggles amid the intersections of moral duty, cultural consciousness, societal expectations, and personal desires. As personal emotions take centre space, the motifs of guilt and personal sacrifice become very prominent.

Mahadevan's novel explores the element of Guilt in a number of characters in the novel, the most important among them being Kunti. Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, plays a significant role in shaping the course of the events of the Mahabharata, yet her narrative remains majorly over-looked or marginalised, under the largely male-dominated narrative of

the Epic. Her biggest guilt stems from her act of abandoning her first born child, Karna. As the novel highlights the circumstances in which Karna was born, from Kunti being a maiden in a conventional patriarchal world, she had no choice but to abandon the child in order to survive respectfully in the society. She knew that the world would call her son illegitimate and would dishonour her for bearing a child before marriage. The novel highlights the gravity of her struggle, as she is seen contemplating, “An illegitimate child carries the sin of his mother” (Mahadevan, 61). The novel explains how the Sage Durvasa had blessed Kunti with the knowledge of the Vashikaran Mantra by using which she could call upon any God of choice. To quote, Durvasa had said, “Meditate upon the devata you wish to call; he will appear before you, obedient to your command” (Mahadevan, 59). Unknowing of the immense power of the Vashikaran Mantra and its irrevocability, Kunti once just accidentally happened to call upon the Sun God as she casually reminisced about the words of the Mantra while offering her prayers to the Sun. Little had she known that her act would actually call upon the Sun God, whose demands she would have to fulfil in return. Born of her union with the Sun God, Karna became the first born son of Kunti, but in a world where bearing a child before marriage was considered a sin. Utterly pained by the moral responsibility of saving her and her family’s honour in the society, she had no choice but to secretly abandon the child. The provocation of the Mantra, the birth of Karna and his final abandonment became the biggest guilt in Kunti’s life, almost nightmarish in extent. As Kunti describes it in the novel, “He called it a boon, but it is worse than any curse” (Mahadevan, 62). As the text focuses on the psychological and emotional struggle of Kunti, Mahadevan not only provides humanising attributes to Kunti, but also offers a feminist and subaltern reinterpretation of the rigid constructs of *dharma* and the patriarchal values embedded in ancient mythology.

Other than Kunti, many other characters also are seen as being embedded in guilt in some form or the another. The first one being Bhishma Pitamaha, who is seen as being guilty

of abducting the three Princesses of Kashi for his brother Vichitravirya. As the novel explains, the three Princesses of Kashi: Amba, Ambika and Ambalika were abducted from their swayamvara by Bhishma in the name of Kshatriya dharma. The novel explains how the lives of the Kashi Princesses went through serious consequences after the abduction. One of the Princesses, Amba, was already betrothed to another King, Salva, whom she had plans to marry to. But after the abduction, when Amba had gone to the King Salva, he outrightly refused to accept her. Grieved by the rejection and loss of her honour in society, she decided to take her own life by committing suicide. By focusing on the incident, the novel highlights the major guilt that the reverent Bhishma Pitamaha had in his life: the guilt of not only the abduction of the three Princesses, but also of the murder of Amba, as a consequence of the abduction. Another character who is seen as being guilty of their past actions, is Satyawati, the Rajmata of Kuru empire. Satyawati is shown as being an elderly woman who made a few ambitious choices in the past in order to secure the throne for her lineage. Being a fisherman's daughter by cast, and not from a Kshatriya lineage, her marriage to King Shantanu was not easy, and her sons could not legally inherit the throne. In spite of that, she made Shantanu promise her that only her sons and not Bhishma, his rightful heir, should inherit the throne, because of which Bhishma was denied his right to natural succession. As she says in the novel, "Hastinapur has not ceased to blame me for depriving it of its rightful heir" (Mahadevan, 123). Moreover, years later when her sons became kings, but were found incapable of bearing children, Satyawati had forced their wives to bear children with the sages in order to continue the lineage. As the narrative quotes other people's views on the incident, it says, "She [Satyawati] and Bhishma, together ruined the lives of all three sisters" (Mahadevan, 167).

The element of guilt and moral responsibility works as a narrative technique in the novel, which focuses on bringing out the emotional side of the story of characters of the

Mahabharata. Keeping Kunti as the centre point of the novel, Mahadevan shifts the onus of the story from the dominant male characters, to the female characters of the story, their emotions, and their sufferings.

Works Cited

1. Mahadevan, Madhavi. *The Kaunteyas*. Speaking Tiger Books. New Delhi. 2016.
2. Bala, Kanchan, and Seema Choudhary. "A Study of Silent Female Characters in Kavita Kane's Novels." (2023).
3. Parvathy, B. M., and P. G. Student. "Feminist Revisionist Mythology and the Lost Voices—A Subversive Analysis of Select Literary Texts."
4. Luthra, Rashmi. "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centered Interpretations of the Indian Epics." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 135–61. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43860745>. Accessed 6 Aug. 2025.