

The Mahabharata As I Remember It!

"Oh! Why did I read The Mahabharata when I had you in my womb?" my mother would shout in dismay whenever my sister and I used to indulge in our customary endless fights in our childhood to claim our possession over some common object that interested both of us.

It was but natural keeping in view the fact that I followed her just after 20 months of her birth, and my mother exasperated after the hard task of looking after the usual household chores and perhaps overburdened by two she-devils which she had as her daughters would put the blame squarely on the great epic for having daughters who were fighting all the time. The poor lady felt morally responsible for this fighting spirit present in both of us as compared to our much docile and cousins that she was certain that it had something to do with her reading of the Mahabharata that has made us so diehards when it so much so as came to sharing a small toy !

And what upset her more was that she had read the Mahabharata with so much of devotion, reverence and a strong belief to have off springs with inborn qualities of the heart and the soul. Such was her devotion that she would religiously read the Mahabharata and pray to the God to bestow her with a child that would surpass others in matters related to learning and morality. And here we were quarreling over small pretexts. I vividly remember my elder sister once hitting me hard with a pencil knife which she was sharpening her pencil with. My howling along with my mother's outburst made whole of the neighborhood assemble to the great embarrassment of my father. This further made me firm in my conviction that my mother's reading of the Mhabharata had something to do with this killer's instinct that we had developed.

That was my first introduction to the great epic and the name connoted to me something dreadful concerned with sibling rivalry and an obsession to win over something that becomes a bone of contention between two warring groups. It was not only my mother but all the people of our acquaintance who would refer to Kauravs and Pandavas while comparing us.

It so happened that my mother in her solemn quest to beget a wonderful child started reading the great epic as the wise old women of her acquaintance had filled her impressionable mind with the so called words of wisdom that the child in the womb learns all that transpires the mind and soul of the mother during her pregnancy and incidentally as luck would have it, the Gita Press Gorakhpur, to which my parents subscribed regularly, had brought out the third edition of the Mahabharata a year prior to the birth of my elder sister, and as it had two parts and as per my mother's statement, she was unable to finish both the parts during her first confinement and started with the second part of the Mahabharata when she carried me in her womb not only because she had conceived the second time soon after the birth of my sister but also had developed a keen interest to follow the second part of the great epic to know the outcome of the great war of all times to have taken place in this great country of ours or what I think today, perhaps to find out how the vows of Draupadi taken during the disrobing would be fulfilled by her five brave husbands!

I thank my mother silently for having read the second part of the Mahabharata while carrying me inside her as now I understand that it is the second part which contains the real message of this great epic and whenever someone comments upon my prowess in handling matters I

silently credit the mahabharata for having filled me with knowledge while I lay cuddled in the safe and secure womb of my mother. This notion was further reinforced by learning from my mother that Abhimanyu had learnt the secret of entering the Chakravahu while Arjuna shared the technique with his wife and yet to be born Abhimanyu lay in the secure womb of his mother, although the death of this great warrior made me wish that why couldn't his mother keep him huddled inside her, to save him from the cruel end that befell him later!

The other indelible memory of the Mahabharata that I carry pertains to a movie that I saw when of impressionable age titled perhaps Mahabharata wherein the scenes concerning the disrobing of Draupadi which instead of making me sorry for her, rather made me envious that Lord Krishna himself came to her rescue whereas never would he show his concern for a lesser mortal like me. As a young fed on the staple diet of Puranas and epics and the monthly issues of the Kalyanas that abounded our home, I had started believing firmly that the Gods appeared at once whenever someone would appeal to them straight from the heart, and in my innocence had appealed to God so many times seeking numerous articles that my parents would not provide us with and fighting with others for some thing that they possessed made little sense to me, after all a lesson that I had learnt was that although it was within the precincts of the Dharma to fight with your siblings for your rights but was unfair to fight with others. Although to seek a favor from the God was an acceptable practice and He always bestowed the believers in a bountiful manner.

But He never cared for my prayers, how many times had I asked Him to get for me the first position in the class or even a new dress and He was providing heaps and heaps of saree to a damsel in distress, Draupadi of course. How partial and partisan even Gods were but it was another truth that the Mahabharata had put in my small head, had not even Lord Krishana, the embodiment of truth itself behaved in a biased manner! Another scene which has become an inseparable part of my memory refers to the jeering and mocking laughter of Draupadi when Duryodhana wasn't able to distinguish between the water and the floor. Weren't we all drilled with some basic good sense in our childhood not to laugh at a person for a deformity which was not within his capacity to mend and worse still was to laugh at a person for a physical deformity that his parents unfortunately had acquired for no fault of theirs. How ill mannered indeed and then everyone blames poor Duryodhana for his stubbornness. How could a princess married in the royal family of Kuru's, behave in such unbecoming manner, really astonished me even when I was too small to comprehend such matters. And here was my mother who would scold me at the drop of a hat even if I would be slightly disrespectful towards anyone. Looking back today, I really thank my mother to have put in my small head to be respectful and even if I had any disrespect, not to let it show on my face, leave alone to speak out and that too in such sarcastic and jeering manner.

It was, in fact, B. R. Chopara's tele-serial The Mahabharata which as an adult, a wife, a mother and more important as a woman I was able to appreciate as Rupa Ganguli had put life in the portrayal of Draupadi's character that changed most of my earlier views and I started to analyze the women of the Mahabharata. It was at this stage that the stark reality about women as chattels and the private property of the men folks descended upon me.

How could Kunti make Draupadi share all five Pandavas as her husband passed my comprehension? Had Draupadi no say in the crucial decision regarding her life and that too when I envied these Aryan women for enjoying so much freedom in choosing their husbands to be. Why couldn't the so called, Dharma incarnate, the all-knowledgeable Yudhishtir rise to the occasion to challenge the immoral diktat of his mother? The knowledge that he himself argued the case for sharing Draupadi among all the five brothers further sickened me as was he not a man who never spoke but truth? And the least said about Arjuna the better it is as he being the one responsible for winning the stakes put for the marriage of Draupadi must would have the courage to speak against this illogic practice that was nowhere legally sanctioned among the Aryans at that point of time and place. Was it not his duty as a husband to protect his wife from all problems? All my sympathies lay with Draupadi as she represented everything that a hapless woman would have to undergo in this male dominated society.

Whatever may have been the reasons of Kunti for this decision but I developed my own serious reservations about the moral conduct of the royal scions. Perhaps it was the turning point for me as I started understanding the famed epic in a new light. While analyzing the reasons that led Kunti to take such a step, I delved deep into her character and found her to be more sinned against than sinning. How could a young princess- robust, healthy and bubbling with youth would have felt when married to a prince who turned out to be impotent, and more so when this prince was not forced down her throat by a pushing father but she herself had selected from the august gathering of the royal scions? Of course with a royal nod after the garlanding ceremony and a little prodding before the ceremony to tilt the scales in the favor of the great Kuru prince.

I sympathized with Kunti when all her dreams turned out to be futile, but all that sympathy vanished when she copulated with others to beget sons to propagate the Pandu lineage, I would have retained my sympathies had she fallen in extramarital relations just to satisfy her own cravings of the flesh and motherhood. Why it had to be a male to dictate her to do something which even in today's world has not a universal acceptance and what to say of appreciation.

The dilemma that I wavered in-between was the result of my appreciation of the women of the Mahabharata as supernatural beings incapable of any misconduct and therefore beyond human criticism, but B. R. Chopra's tele-serial atleast was able to bring out these characters as humans as we are and replete with all human follies. This revelation renewed my courage to study these seemingly out of the world characters in their human form and try to seek the reasons for what I found to be lacking in their morals and conduct, without feeling guilty. This quest to find more about the characters who had been worshipped throughout the ages without even once questioned about what was wrong and what was right by the common people, led me to search for the recreation of the fiction based on the Mahabharata and surprisingly I found the literary scene if not abound but atleast sufficiently littered with such works even in regional languages that brought to surface all those questions that had haunted me right from my childhood.

I remained haunted by these questions and was able to find answers only when I read the new interpretations of the Mahabharata by modern writers. All these years I had thought myself to be a little of a misnomer and was uncomfortable for not believing in what rest of the people seemed to ardently believe upon, but in the ensuing readings of various books which dealt at length the pain and angst of the females, I started feeling that I was not alone in my feelings.

Another question that troubles me these days is that what is the use if a few individuals engaged in critically analyzing these theories, circulate these among themselves without even trying to change the mind set of the people at large where it really matters. Is it not an accepted fact that the stereotypes of the women in the psyche of the masses remain by and large the same? An act of disrobing of a woman or even an attempt in this regard is the manifestation of the power that a man would love to display, a la Dushashna.

The stereotypes of Indian womanhood are so deep rooted in the Indian psyche that attempts at disrobing women or even to make them feel inferior to men have become very common and I personally find misinterpretation of our great epics to be responsible for it. Are we not fed upon the stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana but are always encouraged to become like Sita, an ideal wife? And never have I found reference to encourage a daughter to be like Draupadi! So much so that my own mother was rebuked by an elderly and worldly wise matron for keeping the Mahabharata in her home as she thought it to be an ill omen to keep this classic piece of Hindu literature in a household!

But I have kept the Mahabharata at my own home without anyone telling me not to! And would I had listened to such an illogical advice? I enjoy reading and discussing it with my daughters and it's a pleasure to watch the "world of innocence" mingle with the "world of experience" during our discussions.

