

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Kunti and the Nishadin: Subverting the Patronymic*

#### *Circuits of Guilt and Shame*

In the previous chapter, we have discussed characters who are marginalized due to their positionality. However, marginalisation does not always require living on the margin, away from the centre of power. In the case of the mother of the Pandavas, the Kshatriya Queen Kunti, marginalization happened right at the heart of the power centre, where she remained in limbo, a liminal figure caught between motherhood and mourning. Kunti was part of the mainstream, in fact the mainstay of the system that held up the ‘Rajavritta’, the Feudal-Patriarchal political edifice based on the exploitation of the subaltern. The daughter of King Kuntibhoja and the first wife of King Pandu, she was the causative element which brought the Pandavas back to power and enabled them to gain their lost paternal inheritance. Not only did Kunti raise her sons and those of her co-wife Madri, she also kept them together by making them co-spouses of the daughter of King Drupada. Such was her hold on her sons that not one objected to this unique arrangement which was definitely a masterstroke of political power-play for the combined body-politic.

Yet we find that behind the façade of the power and glory Kunti was as vulnerable, her brave front disguising the pain of being used. This chapter analyses how the woman Kunti was

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forced to hide behind the masks that were enforced by the hegemonic discourse. The purpose is to find out if she was a marginal, hedged in by the phallogocentric forces that dominated the course of her destiny, or if she herself was the perpetrator, the selfish Kshatriya Queen Mother, committed to ensuring victory to the Pandavas. This chapter attempts to demonstrate the transition of Kunti from the pathetic young mother with a babe in her arms, standing on the shores of the Ashwa river in her pre-marital days, to the stoic matriarch who mourned the loss of an era while self-exiling herself out of guilt of winning the war. The effort is to trace the making of the marginal, who despite being raised amidst riches, pomp and splendour, could not claim her most basic need of self-determination. Did Kunti protest? Did her voice drown in the depths of the power-matrix, only to emerge as a hollow ventriloquism of the voice of her captors? Did she never miss Karna? Or was her entire life colored by this one act of hers, where she did not stand up for herself and assert her right to be a mother without the prop that was patriarchy? The study intends to find out how Kunti, herself a marginal in more ways than one, disregards the concerns of others, her view and sense of justice blocked by the blinkers of patriarchal interest.

Kunti's task was effectively carried on by the new bride Draupadi, a mirror image of her astute mother-in-law, who seamlessly took over the role assayed by Kunti. Kunti knew that Draupadi as the common wife would act as the binding factor that would keep the Pandavas together. So far, their lives had been governed by Kunti. and had revolved only around her. "She could be replaced only by a single woman, not five, if that unified focus was to persist," says Pradip Bhattacharya, while discussing Kunti as one of the five *Kanyas* (*Panchakanya* 2009: 32). The matriarch Kunti was a King-maker, ably supported in this task by Vidura, her sagacious brother-in-law. Never one to act in haste, Kunti played her moves carefully, resting only when her sons were the undisputed sovereigns of the land. With her husband gone and the Kingdom usurped by the Kauravas, Kunti was left with the task of raising her sons to win back

what was their own. She comes across as a ruthless woman who did not let the lack of resources and support come in the way of what she had planned to achieve.

What the epic does not reveal is the heartbreak, the guilt and the shame of a nubile girl, her curiosity leading her to an unwanted conception and a son that she could not keep. Kunti's boon had turned into a curse because the patronymic society decided when she could conceive, her sexuality in the manacles of the marriage rites to a man. Though none of her other three sons were biological progeny of King Pandu, they were called Pandavas. The same recognition obviously was denied to Karna, Kunti's first-born, a result of her association with the Sun God, the one who was consigned to the dark waters of the river:

गूहमानापचारं तं बन्धुपक्षभयात्तदा ।

उत्ससर्ज जले कुन्ती तं कुमारं सलक्षणम् ॥१३॥

*(The Mahabharata BORI 1.104.13)*

Neither the God nor the dame gave their names to Karna, who was called Sutaputra (the son of a charioteer) after Adhirath, the charioteer, who fished Karna out of the waters and adopted him.

तमुत्सृष्टं तदा गर्भं राधाभर्ता महायशाः ।

पुत्रत्वे कल्पयामास सभार्यः सूतनन्दनः ॥१४॥

*(The Mahabharata BORI 1.104.14)*

Karna could have been called 'Partha' after Pritha (another name for Kunti), but in a patriarchal system that distinction too was reserved for the sons of Pandu. Kunti never managed to overcome the shame foisted on her by the system, finally dying with the guilt of being an unwed mother, stigmatized for life.

While discussing subalternity and denial Daniel Fletcher observes: "To be marginalized is to be distanced from power and resources that enable self-determination in

economic, political, and social settings...It is an inherent characteristic of those in the margin” (*Marginal People* 2002). As we evaluate Kunti against this we see that when it came to self-determination, she had no say, no sense of self and no control on her body. Patriarchal motherhood and its compulsions ensured that Kunti was ridden with shame and guilt for life. She was the product of a system that privileged phallo-morphism, her entry into a ‘dominant scopic economy signifying her consignment to passivity’, as Luce Irigaray says in a different context in “*This Sex Which Is Not One*” (26). With andro-sanctioned maternity filling the breaches in her stifled female sexuality, Kunti became the source for perpetrating the monocratic discourse of the fathers.

In fact, Patriarchy had clouded her vision to the extent that she, in her quest of ‘justice’ for her sons, committed the unthinkable. In an attempt to cover their track while escaping from the Kaurava persecution, she deliberately invited a Nishadin (a tribal) along with her five sons and lured them to a fiery end. Drunk, incapacitated and unsuspecting, the six tribals were a perfect camouflage for the five Pandavas and their mother. Greed and the prospect of the acquisition of power can blind one to the misfortune of others. Little wonder that the ‘Nishadin’ who met Kunti in one of the stories of Mahashweta Devi informed her that of the three – Dhritarashtra, Gandhari and Kunti – she was the blindest. Gandhari had chosen to close her eyes in protest, or some may say in sympathy with her blind husband, but Kunti had no such compulsion. Kunti’s blindness was induced – she was made power-blind by the forces that be, the lust for gain through war, an androcentric compulsion, passed on to women like rabies.

Gifted away by her father Shurasena, the King of the Vrishnis, to his friend Kuntibhoja, Kunti grew up without a mother. “As a spendthrift squanders his money unthinking, so did my father give me away when yet a girl to his friend”, laments Kunti in ‘*Yuganta: The end of an Epoch* (1968)’:  
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अग्रजातेति तां कन्यामग्रानुग्रहकाङ्क्षिणे ।

प्रददौ कुन्तिभोजाय सखा सख्ये महात्मने ॥३॥

*The Mahabharata BORI 1.104.3*

This work by Irvati Karve gives Kunti what was denied to her for centuries – a voice with which to protest against the injustice done to her by patriarchy (30). We hear of Kunti in the Sambhava Parva where she is cautioned against the wrath of Sage Durvasa, the one whose anger was to be feared. Also called Pritha (vast, well-endowed), Kunti was beautiful. Her service won Durvasa over, who granted her the boon of summoning anyone she wanted, man or a celestial, and be blessed with a progeny from him:

यं यं देवं त्वमेतेन मन्त्रेणावाहयिष्यसि ।

तस्य तस्य प्रसादेन पुत्रस्तव भविष्यति ॥७॥ (*The Mahabharata BORI 1.104.7*)

### *The Disciplining of Desire*

The disciplining of desire began early on, with chastity kept at a premium. The union resulted in the birth of Karna, Kunti's first-born. Since the precondition of the union was restored virginity, Kunti's conscience stood assuaged:

प्रादाच्च तस्याः कन्यात्वं पुनः स परमद्युतिः ।

दत्त्वा च ददतां श्रेष्ठो दिवमाचक्रमे ततः ॥१२॥ (*The Mahabharata BORI 1.104.12*)

But the motherless young girl herself became a mother, only to abandon her child, repeating the motif of 'being abandoned and abandoning in return' as happened in the case of the other Kanyas (virgins). Kunti was one of the five virgins (*Panchakanyas*), fiercely independent, castigated and venerated at the same time. The feature of motherlessness was common to all, and so was the fact that they sustained the pattern of abandonment. Compared to anima, the life-force that is not bound by the societal rules of convenience, the *Panchakanyas* were exposed to the greatest of tragedies, facing them with a steely resolution. None of the

Kanyas were overtly maternal. In Kunti's case the pattern of her abandonment of her sons was repeated when she left her five sons and accompanied Gandhari to the forest. The dissociation that she displayed was a characteristic typical of the Kanya, who furthered life, without attachment to the outcome.

Pradip Bhattacharya adds to the list of the original five Kanyas (Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari), identifying Madhavi, Satyawati, Shakuntala and Ganga as Kanyas which bear the same characteristics. As opposed to these Kanyas were the wives - Madri, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari and Subhadra, who were spouses suffering in silence, never taking the matter in their own hands and never trying to influence the outcome (*Panchakanya* 37). The 'wives' were "syzygy to some male" (Harding 126), conventional females who bore the burden of the expectations of society. Kunti, the courageous one, did not immolate herself on the pyre of her dead husband Pandu. She took it upon herself to raise her own three and Madri's two sons, though the hurt remained. Pandu had preferred her to Madri, dying while having intercourse with her because of the curse of sage Kindama. Though Kunti was jealous of her co-sister's victory over her even in Pandu's death, she acknowledged her defeat:

"Princess of Vahlika!

You are fortunate indeed—

I never had the chance to see

his face radiant in intercourse." (Bhattacharya 28)

King Pandu, unable to have biological off-springs of his own, had requested Kunti to help him carry forward the lineage by having progeny with other men. Kunti refused, finally to give in when Pandu cited scriptures and prayed with folded hands for this favour, giving us a glimpse of a system where a woman was yet in control of her own sexuality. But the practice of strengthening the patronymic structures by giving the sons the name of the father, though nascent, was taking roots. Hence the three sons of Kunti, though born of Dharma, Vayu and

Indra, were called Pandavas after the symbolic father. Kunti was requested by Pandu to share her secret with Madri. After great deliberations, Kunti relented, but felt cheated when Madri was blessed with twins because of her association with the Ashwini Kumaras. Pandu's symbolic patronymy ensured that the sons of Madri and the Ashwini Kumaras, Nakula and Sahadeva by name, were also called the Pandavas.

The woman was taken to be the field owned by the titleholder who sowed the seeds and reaped the harvest. The seed may have been symbolic as was in the case of Pandu, but that was potent enough to obliterate the existence of the field. The name was that of the father, even if symbolic. It did not matter that the entire effort of readying the field and arranging for it to be sowed was undertaken by the mother. In staying silent about her pre-marital conception and the existence of a son by the Sun God Kunti amply betrayed her sense of shame and guilt, insisting that not even in her dreams would she indulge in coitus with anyone other than her husband. The stranglehold of Patriarchal expectations was strengthening on female sexuality, making Kunti lie about her 'misadventure'. Sanctified by patriarchy, the same act that was otherwise condemned became 'legal' and accepted by all. A woman did not have any control over her body, with patriarchy deciding who will she have progeny with, and when. The ethico-psychological defences that the androcentric society had started buttressing against feminine transgression were evident.

Kunti's predicament gives us an invaluable insight into the transition from the matriarchal system when empowered women decided how many children they wanted and with whom. Pandu tries to cajole Kunti by saying that the new-fangled idea of having coitus with just one ritually sanctioned spouse in marriage was recent, and Kunti need not be bound by it. He insists that this practice of having children from multiple husbands was an accepted practice amongst northern Kurus, hence Kunti need not hesitate in following her husband's instructions:

उत्तरेषु च रम्भोरु कुरुष्वद्यापि वर्तते ।

स्त्रीणामनुग्रहकरः स हि धर्मः सनातनः ॥७॥ [The Mahabharata (BORI) 1.113.7]

Pandu threatens her with the sin of infanticide, quoting Shvetaketu who injunctioned that women had to follow the dictates issued by her husband:

व्युच्चरन्त्याः पतिं नार्या अद्य प्रभृति पातकम् ।

भ्रूणहत्याकृतं पापं भविष्यत्यसुखावहम् ॥१७॥ [The Mahabharata (BORI) 1.113.17]

The impotent Pandu wanted sons who would get him wealth in this life and access to the other. The ideas he proposed were in sync with the customs prevalent with the times. Kunti was fully aware of the dynamics, herself a beneficiary turned victim of her own curiosity. But she had by now come to know that in the changed situation three sons from three different husbands at the husband's behest was fine, but one son before marriage was not. So, we see Kunti horrified by the suggestion of conception with men other than the husband Pandu who tries to persuade her into acquiescence. A man's claim on the woman's body was getting complete. "The ceaselessly recurring hiatus between demand and satisfaction of desire maintains the function of the phallus as the signifier of a lack which assures and regulates the economy of libidinal exchanges in their double dimension of quest for love and of specifically sexual satisfaction", observes Irigaray (*This Sex which is not one* 61). Pandu, the patriarch, gets to be the symbolic father and owns Kunti's body despite the lack of his sexual prowess, whereas Kunti, the woman, has no say on her own sexuality.

In her take on the sexuality of the Indian woman in the Indic myths, Arti Dhand (2008) draws our attention to the fact that in theory, sexual relations were to be established only after one was married, i.e. post - Brahmacharya Ashrama (*Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage* 97). Marriage was a sanction to initiate physical intimacy. But as scores of examples prove this was an ideal to be pursued rather than the ground reality. Satyavati, with Parashara (*The Mahabharata BORI* 1.57.64), Kunti with Surya, Devayani with Kacha and later Yayati,



Shakuntala with Dushhyanta, Damyanti with Nala and Madhavi with multiple kings (*The Mahabharata BORI* 5. 114.10) are examples that prove that women had retained the right to check on the right partners, and initiate intimacy if parties are in sync with each other. Parashara promised Satyavati the gift of restored virginity, which led to the birth of sage Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa:

एवमुक्तवतीं तां तु प्रीतिमानृषिसत्तमः ।

उवाच मत्प्रियं कृत्वा कन्यैव त्वं भविष्यसि ॥६३॥

वृणीष्व च वरं भीरु यं त्वमिच्छसि भामिनि ।

वृथा हि न प्रसादो मे भूतपूर्वः शुचिस्मिते ॥६४॥

(*The Mahabharata BORI* 1.57.63-64)

Parents trusted the judgement of the daughters, as we see in the case of Savitri and Satyavana, Shakuntala and Dushhyanta, Devayani and Yayati etc. Dhanda observes:

No doubt the colourful sexual histories of these characters are important plot devices for the narrative, but they do lead one to speculate about a considerable variance between the ideology governing premarital sexuality, and its apparent practice. It would seem either that the ideology merely represents the ideals of the writers with little connection to factual reality, or, more likely, is puritanical response to what is perceived as a more libertine sexual environment. (*Woman as Fire* 114)

To emphasize on her fidelity and loyalty Kunti informed Pandu of the example of Bhadra, the wife of Vyushitashva, who lost her husband to sexual intemperance, yet declined to go with another man and stayed put with her dead husband, her loyalty rewarded with seven sons. Pandu refused to die in coitus and begged Kunti with folded hands to bless him with sons before she finally gave in. The control that Kunti had over the situation is evident in the conversation. Pradip Bhattacharya observes that fertility was sacrosanct, and the practice of widows going celibate was far from normal (*Panchakanya* 27). In fact, they were summoned

back to life, to marry and bear progeny, so that the rhythm of life was restored. Society's shift from the situation where a woman was her own person, her life not held in limbo by the needs of the man in her life, to she losing her selfhood and becoming a non-entity was being engineered. The misogyny inherent in the situation gets expressed in innumerable myths where women have been shown as overtly sexual beings either in need of control or protection. Kunti's being was the bridge that witnessed and facilitated the transition. As a girl she was used, as a wife she was side-lined by the presence of young Madri, as Pandu's widow she lived to witness the change in behaviour of her kith and kin, as a Mother-in-law she had to take the tough decision to implicate Draupadi in the same controversial life that she lived, and as a mother she had to swear by tough love. But never did Kunti give in, persisting against odds and following what the grand epic calls 'Apaddharma' - The Dharma of Exigencies (Ganguli, *Shanti parva*, Section CXLI). As a woman she survived in a man's world and was witness to the transition.

In his work on '*Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata*', Simon Brodbeck (2007) finds the pattern of an absentee parent repeated in the case of Kunti's husband Pandu, who, like his son Yudhisthira, did not know his father (151). In his discussion on gendered soteriology Brodbeck finds both father and son having problems in coming to terms with their masculinity. Pandu's response to his childlessness was renunciation. He was supported in this endeavour by his wives, Kunti and Madri, who were ready to retire to the Himalayas as true 'Pativratas' (devoted and chaste wives). Kunti accepted an ascetic's routine, renounced the palatial life that she was entitled to and along with her husband took to the forest. Brodbeck finds the epic describing three separate renunciations of King Pandu: of the kingdom, of sex (enforced, with one fatal exception), and of hunting (152). While comparing gendered soteriology in the post-Vedic Moksha - Nirvana - Kaivalya traditions which speak of salvation through spiritual

development, Brodbeck studies the repeated motif of the male who gives up on the worldly ties.

Citing the Shramana tradition that acknowledges ‘Dukha’ – misery - that ultimately claims anyone who is born, and renunciation as the remedy to that affliction, Brodbeck draws a parallel between the renunciate male severing the worldly ties, and specially the act of leaving his wife, to the soul leaving the Samsara. He identifies three stages in Pandu’s career – First, his initial relaxed life of gaming, hunting and other Kshatriya pursuits, second, his forced asceticism, and third, the dharmic compromise (ibid). But even Pandu’s death, when desire overtook caution and he indulged in an intercourse with Madri, is a paradigm of desirelessness, contends Brodbeck, quoting the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, which declares: “Just as a man embraced by a woman he loves is oblivious to everything within or without, so this person embraced by the atman consisting of knowledge is oblivious to everything within or without.” (4.3.21, tr. Olivelle, ibid)

Kunti did not have the good fortune of being the woman for whom Pandu left either this world or the other. She was strong enough to say no to Pandu’s request for the mantra for Madri a second time over. To give her credit, she fulfilled the promise given to Madri at the time of her immolation on Pandu’s funeral pier, looking after her co-wife’s sons as if they were her own. This strength of character is manifested in almost everything that Kunti does. Raising five young kids by herself with little help from anywhere took its toll on her. Perhaps for fear of the Kauravas neither the Shuras nor the Vrishnis came forward to extend any help to the young widow. The only help that she got was from Vidura, who had her back, a constant presence in her life right from the education of her sons to being available in times of crisis, the worse being the one that they faced when the House of Lac went up in flames. Kunti took charge, and from then on, every decision taken by her was directed by vulnerability masked as desperate courage, and the sheer will to survive.

In her work *Yuganta: The end of an Epoch* (1968), Irvati Karve finds every man in Kunti's life contributing to her unhappiness. Talking of her being kept in the service of Durvasa, the sage known for his temper and the ability to destroy someone through his curse, Karve implies that service in this context meant personal service: being at the beck and call of the sage, doing all his bidding, even sharing his bed if he so desired. Durvasa was happy with the services of young Kunti, which resulted in the birth of Karna, called 'Vasusena' (the wealthy) because of the money, gold and other precious items kept in the basket that carried the infant (30):

प्रकाशकर्मा तपनस्तस्यां गर्भं दधौ ततः । अजीजनत्ततो वीरं सर्वशस्त्रभृतां वरम् ॥१०॥

सहजं कवचं बिभ्रत्कुण्डलोद्द्योतिताननः । अजायत सुतः कर्णः सर्वलोकेषु विश्रुतः ॥११॥

(*The Mahabharata BORI* 1.104.10-11)

Karve opines that a son being born to Kunti from the Sun-god may have been symbolic as the Rishi, blazing as the Sun, may have blessed Kunti with a son: "Kunti was serving a Brahmin for a year and that she should bear him a son was not such an extraordinary occurrence"(ibid).

Karve gives the example of Kunti's grandmother- in -law Satyavati who was solicited by sage Parashara, a brahmin, and was blessed with none other than the author of the great epic, sage Vyasa. Karve does not see the divine pater of Karna playing any significant role in his life or upbringing, remaining at best a shadow figure unlike the blazing son. The 'Kavacha' and 'Kundala' supposedly gifted to Karna by the Sun God show the Kshatriya origin of the warrior. Kunti, herself a Kshatriya lady, may have given this identity to her about to be abandoned new-born son. This one act of Kunti created a life-long identity crisis for Karna. Neither a Kshatriya nor a Suta, devoid of the mother's love and the father's name, Karna sought intimacy, recognition and companionship with Duryodhana, thus facilitating the fratricidal war.

Kunti's exploitation, followed by the non-assertion of her natural right to keep her newborn echoed down the corridors of power and brought about the War of Mahabharata. Karna was more than a match for Arjuna, Kunti's ace archer son, and if Duryodhana ever hoped to win the great war it was with the aid of this new friend of his. The circumstances in which this friendship between Kunti's first-born and Duryodhana began reeks of the opportunism and cunning of the part of the Kauravas. Kunti had to remain a silent spectator of the charade going on in the competition ground where Arjuna was out to prove that he was the greatest archer alive. Karna, Kunti's illegitimate son, who was keen on proving this wrong was snubbed by Kripacharya, the brother-in-law of Guru Drona, as the competition was open only for nobility and higher caste people. He was instead asked to earn a kingdom for himself if he wanted to compete with a prince. Duryodhana seized this opportunity in pronouncing Karna the King of Anga Desha (present Bhagalpur, Bihar), and earned his lifelong loyalty that transcended the ties of blood.

Kunti had this one opportunity to set the record right, but the circumstances of Karna's birth held her tongue. The patronymic society had stopped tolerating the choice that Satyawati had in having a son with Parashara, and the resultant self-righteousness that Vyasa experienced was missing in the case of Karna. The hurt, humiliation and hushed rumours damaged the self-confidence of the illegitimate son and warped the sense of justice of the mother. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva observes:

Because of its specific isolation within the discursive totality of our time, this shattering of discourse reveals that linguistic changes constitute changes in the status of the subject – his relation to the body, to others, and to objects; it also reveals that normalized language is just one of the ways of articulating the signifying process that encompasses the body, the material referent, and language itself. (15–16)

According to Kristeva, literature is abjection's privileged signifier, and far from being a minor, marginal activity, literature represents the ultimate coding of human crises, of the most intimate and most serious apocalypses (*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* 208). She brings out the "nocturnal power" of writing: "Literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word" (ibid).

### *The Maternal Body versus the 'Cultural body': Transition from the Symbiotic to the Symbolic*

"We view the thetic phase – the positing of the imago, castration, and the positing of semiotic motility – as the place of the Other, as the precondition for signification, i.e., the precondition for the positing of language. The thetic phase marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic," says Kristeva (*Revolution* 48). She finds the maternal body the base from where the symbolic order can be defied and disturbed, as maternity 'blurs the borders of self-hood' (49). While discussing the subject in process, Kristeva shows how the evolution of the subject is related to the evolution of the language (ibid). The symbolic function changes under the pressure of the semiotic, says Kristeva. Even though the female is excepted from authority and language, she owns the veiled, indiscernible component that permits their process. But, if pushed to the wall, she can even become a source of pessimism and aggravation, becoming a hysteric (Guberman 105-106).

Drawing on Kristeva's concepts, we see that Kunti's body is seen here as the site which internalizes and subsequently expresses the nuances governing the social structures of the changing times. Her body was inscribed by the societal norms, customs and conventions which dictate what a woman could or couldn't accomplish. "What is learned by the body is not something that one has but something that one is", asserts Bourdieu (*In Other World* 1990: 73).

Kunti, the mother was split between divided loyalties. On the one hand was the prestige of being the widow of King Pandu, committed to raising his sons, the much respected Queen Mother, absolutely above reproach, and on the other was the shame and fear of being exposed for her pre-marital liaisons, and the deep-rooted mother's guilt of having abandoned an infant. In a generational shift the social philosophy was changing from matronymic to patrilineal, with laws in place to control a woman's body.

In her work "*Women's Time*," Kristeva agrees with James Joyce, using his phrase "Father's time, mother's species," to identify two dimensions: "Father's time" which refers to linearity, the time occupied by men, enriched with the professed purpose of growth. The expression "mother's species" conjures the realm that womenfolk have conventionally occupied: Chora, a space-time which swings between regeneration and eternity. Agreeing with Plato, Kristeva sees Chora as "a chaotic space that is and becomes a precondition for creating the first measurable bodies" (*Women's Time* 42). The Chora is marked by semiotic motion, generating signifying actions which concern every woman. Those particularities of the maternal body compose woman into a being of folds, a catastrophe of being (*Tales of Love* 259-260). The loss that women face makes them out of sync with the socio-symbolic contract, bearing on the maternal body, severing it from the symbolic. Speaking of depression and melancholia Kristeva posits: "Knowingly disinherited of the Thing, the depressed person wanders in pursuit of continuously disappointing adventures and loves; or else retreats, disconsolate and aphasic, alone with the unnamed Thing" (*Black Sun* 13). The depressed narcissist "has the impression of having been deprived of an unnameable, supreme good, of something unrepresentable," something that "no word could signify" (ibid).

Drawing a parallel, one can see Kunti, the chief mother-mourner in the grand epic, a melancholic figure, barely able to express her ache. She sees no point in joining her sons in the jubilation after the great war of the Mahabharata is over. She chooses to withdraw back to the

forest, in the womb-like space, the Chora, which shelters her from the angst that is her destiny. The desire that inspired her self-absorption dies along with the Kaurava and the Pandava martyrs of the war. The shroud of her melancholia has no desire left, fruitless as it seems at the end of it all. “Consequently, for such a person, no object could replace the irreplaceable perception of a place or pre-object confining the libido or severing the bonds of desire,” Kristeva writes in a different context (*Black Sun* 14).

Kunti lacked motivation to engage in the symbolic realm, an orphan in the realm of the symbolic. To her victory seem meaningless. Her sense of unity compromised by the outcome, she regressed back to incoherence, self-doubt and despair, sinking into what Kristeva after Freud called the ‘Death drive’. Kristeva says that the death drive appears as a “biological and logical inability to transmit psychic energies and inscriptions,” therefore destroying “movements and bonds” (ibid 17). The bond that Kunti had with her sons, or rather, with her known world dissolved in her regression into the symbolic. She lost cohesion and the ability to integrate her experiences. Quoting Melanie Klein, Kristeva says:

The early ego largely lacks cohesion, and a tendency towards integration alternates with a tendency towards disintegration, a falling into bits . . . the anxiety of being destroyed from within remains active. It seems to me in keeping with the lack of cohesiveness that under the pressure of this threat the ego tends to fall into pieces. (*Black Sun* 19)

Kristeva observes that the melancholic also experience this crumbling of bonds or a disintegration of the self. Kunti’s depression marks her symbolic invalidation: “The depressive denial that destroys the meaning of the symbolic also destroys the act’s meaning and leads the subject to commit suicide without anguish of disintegration, as a reuniting with archaic non-integration, as lethal as it is jubilatory” (ibid). Kristeva says that the death drive has two parts: one directed outward as a purely destructive discharge of energy and the other-directed inward



as a disintegration of the living self, a wish to return to an inorganic state and homeostasis. The first of these involves a wish to kill others and the second a wish to annihilate oneself (*Black Sun* 16). Drawing from Kristeva's theory, we observe that Mahashweta Devi's Kunti, propelled by this death drive, does not run away from the blaze. Her sadness is such that she does not have any emotional defence against the self-destructive death instinct. No sign has any meaning for her, so she has little defence against the death drive. The law of the father controls the world that has been crafted by words, hence it is obvious that Kunti or women like her did not have a voice. Her silence when she placed her new-born in the swirling waters to die, or another time, when she could have saved Karna from the public humiliation, he suffered at the royal archery competition when his caste and low position was out, was not her silence. Rather it was the silence that echoed down the halls of the father, ventriloquizing the voice of patriarchy.

Kunti's maternal body was subordinated to the 'cultural body' created by the expectations of the society that was transitioning from the symbiotic to the symbolic. This gives us the reason why Satyawati, the grandmother-in-law of Kunti, was allowed to acknowledge, even be proud of her pre-marital alliance and introduce her son to the royal household in a very special role, where he got to sire sons with Amba and Ambalika, Satyawati's daughters-in-law, but Kunti had to set her new-born adrift, condemning him to certain death. A woman's body was gradually being relegated to an object, devoid of mind, not in her control. The Father's word decided what was legitimate and what was not. This loss of self was condoned by women who were made to believe that the law of the Father was eternal, and they would be digressing from the 'path' if they question it. The mind-bending was perpetrated with the help of their own kind, who in time became willing partners because they were convinced of what was being told.

A product of this tradition of androcratic mind-binding, Kunti was the victim of a system that perpetrated itself ironically through women. Having been objectified and

essentialized by the hegemonic culture of patriarchy, she forced her daughter-in-law Draupadi in a similar predicament when she instructed her sons to share whatever has been brought back by them. That the 'thing' in question was a living, breathing woman does not make Kunti change her judgement. The power-dynamics convinced her that the greater purpose of keeping her sons united for restoration of the Kingdom was more important. All five of her sons getting tied to King Drupada in a bond of marriage and kinship through Draupadi served a dual purpose - on one hand it proclaimed to one and all, specially to the Kauravas, that the Pandava prowess in arms was undisputed. Arjuna emerged as the ace archer who won the royal competition, with the Pandavas successfully stalling the mayhem that followed and bringing the bride home.

On the other hand, as acknowledged by Karna, Draupadi as Shree (the Goddess of wealth, both symbolically and literally), commonly owned by the Pandavas, ensured that the brothers were together. Moreover, the Panchala wealth was used in restoring the Kingdom to Kunti's sons. In the process Kunti sacrificed the expectations and aspirations of a young bride who had chosen Arjuna as her partner, who did not know how to make sense of this unique arrangement of polyandry, who acquiesced because she had no alternative, yet, ironically, was blamed for it lifelong. Draupadi's infamy as a nymphomaniac, a woman who enjoyed many men (*The Mahabharata BORI* 2.61.1), a blood thirsty 'Kriya' (Karve 31) who pushed them to war and brought about annihilation, took birth in this act of Kunti whose own mind was conditioned by the 'Rajavritta' (*After Kurukshetra* 43) - the male-centric feudal approach to war which wants victory, and patriarchal assertion at all cost. In fact, Draupadi took over the mantle from Kunti, and acted as a mirror image of her mother-in-law, coaxing, goading, challenging her husbands exactly as Kunti had been doing to her sons.

Aggression was supposedly passed on and promoted by women, who were also the real victims of the war. Instead of foot binding (as in China), a type of mind-binding took place. We find this schizophrenic mindset evident in the question raised by Jamison about epic

women in the Mahabharata. Kunti's guilt was sublimated in being the perfect wife that she claimed to be, but the shame she transferred to Draupadi in the name of administrative expediency that suited the royal ambitions was unpardonable.

### *A Prisoner - perpetrator of the Patriarchal Construct*

Karve argues that Pandu was the fourth man to add to Kunti's grief and desolation, the first three being her real father Shurasena, her adopted father Kuntibhoja and her illegitimate son Karna. She seems to have forgotten Durvasa/Surya who were instrumental in bringing about the calamitous development, making Pandu the fifth. Despite the challenges that life had thrown Kunti's way, she does not break down. In fact, she comes across as one of those 'fearfully able women' remembered by Jamison (*Sacrificed Wife* 15-16). Though after Pandu's death as Kunti returned from the forest she was received well by Bhishma, and the young princes started receiving the training in weaponry and royal administration, Kunti was wary of the Kauravas. The Pandavas were popular because of their demeanor and manners. The law of primogeniture said that Yudhishthira, being the eldest son of Pandu, would be crowned king, something that Dhritarashtra and his son Duryodhana could scarcely tolerate. Kunti, the young mother had to witness the poisoning of Bhima, her second son. Several attempts to jeopardize the well-being of her sons were thwarted with the help of Vidura, who also saved them from the House of Lac at Varnavata. To remove the Pandavas from public eye, as also to eliminate them when the time was right, a palatial house was constructed and Kunti was encouraged to live there, entertain the Brahmanas and indulge in other austerities. Purochana, the devious counsellor of Duryodhana, was commissioned to build the palace of Lac, with a set date on which it would go up in flames. Vidura, who knew the Mlechcha language, forewarned Kunti regarding the impending disaster, and in a very clever move, they

themselves set the palace afire and exited through a secret passage specially created for the purpose.

To lay the Kaurava fears to rest and to assure them that the Pandavas were dead a ploy was undertaken by Kunti. She invited an old tribal woman of the Nishada community to come and partake of a feast that Kunti had arranged for her and her five sons. These unfortunate souls were too drunk to escape the inferno, providing evidence to Duryodhana of the demise of the Pandavas. The epic reports in chilling detail:

Desirous of obtaining food, there came, as though impelled by fate, to that feast, in course of her wanderings, a Nishada woman, the mother of five children, accompanied by all her sons. O king, she, and her children, intoxicated with the wine they drank, became incapable. Deprived of consciousness and more dead than alive, she with all her sons lay down in that mansion to sleep. Then when all the inmates of the house lay down to sleep, there began to blow a violent wind in the night. Bhima then set fire to the house just where Purochana was sleeping. Then the son of Pandu set fire to the door of that house of lac. Then he set fire to the mansion in several parts all around. Then when the sons of Pandu were satisfied that the house had caught fire in several parts those chastisers of foes with their mother, entered the subterranean passage without losing any time. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Adi Parva Jatugriha Daha Parva, Section CL)

Kunti, the Kshatriya Queen who perpetrated this heinous act has been questioned by the non-subject, the old Nishadin who, along with her sons, died in the blaze at the Laksha Griha. In Mahashweta Devi's "*After Kurukshetra*", when Kunti has decided to give up on the male-driven power struggle and look for peace by introspection, she meets her nemesis in the Nishadin, who has come to ask her the reason why she and her sons were murdered in cold

blood by Kunti (42). Representing Lokavritta, or the way of the common people, the tribal woman took the royal aristocrat to task for being extremely self-centered, cruel and power-drunk, to the extent that she could not even count the ‘murder’ of the innocents as one of her ‘regrets’ as she sat down to reflect on her life. Kunti is burdened with the culpability of causing the mayhem that was the Mahabharata. Having seen her sons succeed at the cost of thousands of lives, having been Kuntibhoja’s daughter and Pandu’s wife and the Pandava’s mother, she is unable to find herself. Burdened with guilt, she chooses to join Dhritarashtra and Gandhari to the forest, even when her sons expect her to stay and share the glory that victory in the war had bestowed on them. She is envious of the calm that Gandhari displays, having understood the cyclic and eternal nature of time.

Kunti recalls a memory that burns within like a funeral pyre – that of being introduced to her own sexuality as a young girl in her father’s home, and the subsequent desertion of the first real relationship that she ever knew - that of a mother. She wants to purge and clean herself by confessing all her wrongs, now that eventide beckons and she realizes the futility of the exercise. But wars, violence and aggression are the mainstay of Rajavritta, or the way of life of the aristocrats, because wars may be initiated by the royals, but they are fought by the subaltern. Mahashweta Devi’s Nishadin asks Kunti:

Tell me, who knew of a certain elderly Nishadin and her five young sons? Who invited them to her feast for brahmins? Who made sure that they were served unlimited amounts of wine? How often have you invited any Nishad- Kirat- Sabar-Nagavanshi forest tribals? Or was it just that one time that the outcastes were invited? (*After Kurukshetra* 43)

The Nishadin informs Kunti that by the laws of Mother Nature, she, her sons, her allies were all held guilty. The Nishadin’s eyes were Kunti’s death sentence, but she refused to punish

Kunti, as an eye for an eye was the way of the Rajavritta. The Lokavritta believed in forgiving and moving on. The Nishadin reminds Kunti that of the three who repatriated to the forest at the end of the epic, she was the blindest, as she could not see her own killer demeanor and other shortcomings. “In the Rajavritta, does one beg forgiveness for killing the innocent?”, asks Devi (ibid 44), as if reminding Kunti, who, conditioned by Rajavritta (the ways of royalty), did not know if she should ask for forgiveness. The Nishadin apprises Kunti that nature abhors waste, and if she was part of the Lokavritta her conception would have been celebrated with a marriage( ibid 40), sparing her the lifelong guilt of being a mother who abandoned her nursing babe-in-arms, and the shame of being an ‘unwed mother’ who let her father and her would-be husband down. Kunti’s body was not hers, it belonged to patriarchy.

### *Disrupting the Stable Ego Boundaries of the Symbolic*

Mahashweta Devi’s Nishadin did not just rally against the crime perpetrated against she and her children, she also questioned the injustice done to Kunti who was made an instrument of patriarchal aggression. In his journal article “*Motherhood and Mourning in Kunti and the Nishadin*”(Bharatiya Pragna), Arunabha Bose observes that the polyphony and heterogeneity of female voices in Devi’s story displaces the omniscient narrative voice of Vyasa while rescuing the ‘woman’ Kunti who was contained in the self-reflecting representations of patriarchy (1). He points out that the story questions the polyvalence of power entrenched in structures of fatherhood, family formation and dynastic propagation. Bose finds the male socio-symbolic system accommodating Kunti’s womb so that Dharma, Vayu and Indra as phallic substitutes to Pandu form a patriarchal discursive system in which symbolic fatherhood is the only cultural instrument for the production of desire (ibid). Bose observes:

Seen in Kristeva's terms, Kunti's exile to the forest away from the domain of Masculine aggression and violence, signals her severance from the universality of the Law of the Father and entry into the domain of the Maternal, Feminine and pre-oedipal as she enters the womblike darkness of the Aranya (forest) ruled by the mother, Devi Aranyaka. (*Motherhood and Mourning* 2017:6)

While discussing Kristeva in '*Revolutions in Poetic Language* (1985)' Bose speaks of the semiotic as an eruption or excess, as bodily pulsations and drives that rupture the stable ego boundaries of the symbolic. He reports that the semiotic can be seen as a revocation of the maternal that has been repressed by the normalizing operations of the phallic and social economy in language and culture. "The forest thus becomes the locus of reclaiming that lost maternity; of reinstating one's attachment to the abandoned maternal principal which the paternal symbolic law had declared unlawful and transgressive," contends Bose, identifying "an imaginative correspondence and sympathetic co-relation between the elderly 'woman' Kunti and the Nishadin, since both the widowed women are finally outside the transactional space of institutionalized male history and Dharma and even outside of Vyasa's textual universe" (5). He sees Kunti's body as re-signified through masculine cultural semantics, with the phallic signifying economy differentiating the maternal/lactating/pregnant body from the erotic/libidinal/orgasmic body:

Kunti's productive/generative/gestative body being the primary site of Labour production gets normalized within the heterosexist marital culture and for her it is only this 'docile', de-eroticized body which is definitionally maternal, while the Nishadin re-conceptualizes female sexuality, whether pre-marital or non-maternal, as polymorphous, liberated and erotogenic. (*Motherhood and Mourning* 4)

Bose analyses the emergence of Kunti's disciplined marital sexuality as dependent on the successful repression and banishment of this pleasure principle. He considers marriage a heterosexist institution which normalizes and produces the marital/maternal body as passive, docile, singular and end-directed, thus abstracting it from the multiplicity and fluidity of the female form, making marital, generative sexuality a women's 'only' sexuality (ibid). He observes that Kunti's body is 'over-consumed' by demands of patrilineal exigencies, having a Use Value that is abstracted or extracted from the laboring female body:

Having internalized the socially produced meaning of the body, psychically and historically as maternal/asexual, Kunti is unable to reconcile her two bodies – the erotic/unlawful/pleasurable/pleasure-seeking/undomesticated body with the de-eroticized/lawful/pleasure-giving/marital body. (*Motherhood and Mourning* 2)

Bose finds Kunti only thinking of the Pandavas as her biological progenies since genealogically their birth followed her marriage and took place under Pandu's patriarchal supervision and for political ends of furthering his line (ibid 4). He points out that the brief sexual encounter that Kunti had with Surya becomes a site for the symptomatic eruption of Kunti's sexuality, a point of recalcitrance withholding within it unsocialized eroticism of Kunti which exceeds the modes of Vyasa's phallogocentric representational model (1). He contends that Kunti's femininity remains dependent upon Pandu's Masculine needs, the Kshatriya socio-symbolic system accommodating Kunti's womb so that Dharma, Indra and Vayu act as phallic substitutes to Pandu, forming a patriarchal discursive system in which symbolic fatherhood is the only cultural instrument for the production of desire. Bose argues that the epic shows us a Kunti whose sexuality is always Other-directed or Phallus-oriented even though Pandu exhibits a phallic lack. According to him the institutional regimes, social organizations and economic structures of exchange make it convenient that Kunti exercises her gift of summoning a God (a



metonym of sexual choice) only on her husband's command. The Gods serve as substitutive mythological figurations simulating the phallic mastery that Pandu is unable to exercise biologically," argues Bose (2).

### *Gendered Subaltern and the War of Dharma*

In a different take on the 'Pancha Kanya', Mahashweta Devi brings forth her own set of five young women. In *'After Kurukshetra'* (2018), Godhumi, Gomati, Yamuna, Vitasta and Vipasha are girl-brides just widowed by the war (4). They are taken to the queen mother Kunti for scrutiny to see whether they are suitable company for Uttara, another widow, Abhimanyu's child-bride, herself with a child. The war has left widowhood in its wake, and Kunti observes the Kaurava widows moving about like white shadows. Their lives are going to be marked by misery for no fault of their own. Mahashweta's Kunti regrets the war and wishes that Uttara be blessed with a daughter – if she delivers a son, he too will propound violence in the name of glory in war. Kunti recruits these 'Pancha Kanyas' to give company to Uttara who was going out of her mind after the war, having lost her husband of six months, the great warrior Abhimanyu. These 'Pancha Kanyas', aggrieved themselves, display a remarkable resilience in the adversity. Their laments are strung into words and sung:

The fields of golden wheat lie un-ploughed, Hai Hai  
Seeds of wheat and sesame lie waiting in store, Hai Hai  
Who cast a shroud over the village, Hai Hai  
The huts are dark, no lamp is lit  
See the grief in the children's eye  
This war turned villages into cremation grounds, Hai Hai

*(After Kurukshetra 10-11)*

Devi's Pancha Kanyas condemn the war because it brings death in its wake. They are war-widows, but are not 'proud' of the fact, something Uttara, the royal daughter-in-law, does not understand. She is confused because Rajavritta (the feudal aristocratic way) glorifies war, whereas Lokavritta, the way of life of these Pancha Kanyas, decries war. Uttara is given to understand that those who die in a war of Dharma go to heaven. Since the Pancha Kanyas do not believe in this, Uttara wonders if there are seats reserved in Heaven only for the rich and the privileged. The young tribal widows inform Uttara that a war that compels brothers to kill brothers was not their idea of Dharma. They spurn the palace and insist on going back to their modest houses and their fields, where life regenerates, as against a battlefield where death decimates people in the name of Dharma. They have to get married again, for Lokavritta (the way of the common people) believes in reverting back to life. They cannot afford the luxury of extended grieving. Their husbands may have died in the King's war. But they are still alive. The girls inform Uttara that they cannot live in these chambers of silence, where there is no life. But Uttara has to follow the example of Arya Kunti, who is in perpetual mourning. Rajavritta expects its widows to have no right to happiness. The widows in Lokavritta, like the Pancha Kanya, do not have the luxury of unlimited mourning.

Mahashweta's Kunti is different from Vyasa's Kunti who tried to inspire her sons into action by narrating the story of Vidula, her alter-ego, the brave Kshatriya queen who egged her son on to fight a Dharma war. The son was reminded of the fact that as a Kshatriya, it was his duty to fight for the restoration of his Kingdom. Her son was not too keen on risking death in the battlefield, but the pacifist in him was quickly over-ruled by his fire-brand mother who promised him all support provided he fights. Even the prospect of her son's death does not deter Vidula as dying in a just war is a matter of pride, glory and great honor. In a succinct message to be passed on to her hesitant sons, Kunti refers to the story where Vidula, 'devoted to Kshatriya virtues', reprimanded her son Sanjaya, who had become utterly dejected after a

defeat. Vidula, the mother, challenges her son to 'be a man'. She claims that only one who cherishes wrath is a man (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Udyoga Parva: Bhagwat Yana Parva: Section CXXXIII). The Kunti who admires Vidula and uses her strategy in the *Ur-Mahabharata* is much mellowed down, confused and regretful in Devi's trilogy. Perhaps the difference is also in the fact that outside of Vyasa's meta-narrative, Kunti, reinscribed by a woman, is herself for the very first time.

In her essay titled 'Show you are a man!' in *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata*, Andrea Custodi observes that despite the ideal of motherhood being synonymous to love, sacrifice and tearful loyalty, mothers such as Vidura and Kunti sharply incite their sons to battle. She finds that behind the 'ideal passivity' and 'meek hearts' consistently acknowledged in speech by the epic's female protagonists, there is agency and insistence on recognition of rights and wrongs. There is an undeniable presence as a shaping force to their own lives that decides the course of history and the destiny of male characters, infers Custodi, finding it oblique, as it can be seen only out of the corner of the epic eye, existing as a gap or absence in the Symbolic Order (221).

Kunti promised the following 'Phalashruti', explicitly addressing a female audience, after recounting the dialogue between Vidula and her son: "A pregnant woman who hears it again and again is sure to bear a hero, a champion in learning, austerity, self-control, an ascetic, blazing with the luster of brahman, honored with applause, fiery, strong, lordly, a great warrior, daring, unassailable, an invincible conqueror" (*The Mahabharata BORI* 5.134.18-20). Kunti, following Rajavritta, was one with Vidula in egging her sons on in showing their prowess in arms. Power is seductive and does not distinguish between sexes when it comes to recruiting disciples. Kunti, the historical subject, chose not to see the ahistorical non-subject that was the Nishadin as a human deserving of the right to life. The idealism of the Rajavritta totally negated

the realism of the Lokavritta. Caught in the fetters of an ethico-political androcentric system, Kunti, the woman, the gendered subaltern, lost to Kunti, the brain-washed royal Kshatriya Queen. By the time she realized the enormity of her error, the damage was done.

### *Kunti: The Proletariat on the Exchange Market*

In a 'dominant phallic economy' a woman who did not tow the aggressive male line of thought was not of much use. In her work titled '*This Sex which is not One*', Irigaray (1985) points out that a commodity could not enjoy itself without provoking the consumer's anxiety over the disappearance of his possession (*This Sex* 30). The commodification of women was evident in the fact that they had no control over their physical, emotional and libidinal body. Irigaray asserts that the exchange that could not be defined in terms "proper" to woman's desire was a pure mirage which questioned all existing economies (ibid). It is obvious that Kunti, the woman, was objectified in the competitive exchange among men and was exemplified in the contest for the proprietorship of mother earth. Kunti, the proletariat on the exchange market, did not know how to defend her desire. Drawing upon Irigaray, we can say that Kunti's body, initiating a "ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either" (*This Sex* 30), was a site of transaction. Vying for Pandu's attention, she found herself and her co-sister Madri consigned to the state of rival commodities on the shelf, sampled by the custodians of the phallocratic world view.

While questioning why the maternal function must take precedence over the more specifically erotic function in woman, Irigaray contends that this prescription has to be comprehended within an economy and an ideology of (re)production (*This Sex* 64). "Even a marriage is not made secure until the wife has succeeded in making her husband her child as well and in acting as mother to him", insists Irigaray (ibid). We find Kunti advising Draupadi

to take care of her husbands, especially Nakula and Sahadeva, as she would look after her own sons. The man must be 'mothered', but, on the contrary, a woman has to hate her own mother, leave her own house, abandon her own family, renounce the name of her own mother and father, in order to take A woman had to fulfil man's genealogical desires by sacrificing herself and disowning all that she considered her own to listen to the words of the 'Father'.

In Kunti's case, Pandu, the token father, was more potent than the symbolic ones, with the common name 'Pandava' being used for the sons despite the 'Niyoga' practiced by Kunti. As for the mother herself, she was disposable enough to be dropped altogether as in the case of Drona, Kripa/Kripi and even Draupadi. 'Ayonijasambhava', or 'not born of a woman' was an epithet given to those who were extra-ordinary and transcended the heritage of the womb. Irigaray observes that the feminine occurred only within models and laws devised by male subjects (*This Sex* 87). While critiquing the universal desire of being blessed with sons, Irigaray revisits Freud's interpretation of women's sexuality, which confirms that the female sex suffers from "Penis envy," - the desire to appropriate for oneself the genital organ that has a cultural monopoly on value:

Since women don't have it, they can only covet the ones men have, and, since they cannot have it, they can only seek to find equivalents for it. They can find fulfilment only in motherhood, bringing a child, a "penis substitute," into the world: and for the woman's happiness to be complete, the child must be a male. (*This Sex* 87)

While analysing Freud's theory Irigaray reports that a woman continues to be tied to the father's laws for fear of losing his love, her only source of value. She abides by the father's law for fear of abandonment. Hence the desire to acquire the penis from the father is substituted by the craving to have a male child, brought in this world to fulfil the narcissistic desires of man (*This Sex* 87). Irigaray posits that the truth about female sexuality is restated even more rigorously when psychoanalysis takes discourse itself as the object of its investigations, as it is

here that anatomy is no longer available to serve as proof-alibi for the real difference between the sexes (ibid). She claims that the laws governing discourse have been shaped by men for centuries, repressing female imaginary. One can deduce why the grand epic, a male-centric narrative, did not do justice to the female characters, who had to devise their own ways to get themselves heard. Thus young, libidinal Kunti, sanctioned for the natural urges that perpetrate life, became the flint-hearted matron, the cold -blooded alter-ego of patriarchy. Kunti had to wait till Devi's re-telling to unburden herself and undo the historical wrong perpetrated by her on yet another mother, both gendered subalterns and captives of patriarchal discourse.

Being a mother, according to Irigaray, is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. She acknowledges that in this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself by playing a part for which she is not compensated, as in our social order, women are "products" used and exchanged by men, their status being that of merchandise (*This Sex* 84). Irigaray asserts that such objects of use and transaction could not claim the right to speak and to participate in exchange, which was why women had to remain an "infrastructure", unrecognized by the society. She regrets that the use, consumption, and circulation of women's sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as "subjects." Kunti, the woman, was in a situation of manipulation in the manoeuvres of exchange, "entering into these exchanges only as the object of a transaction, unless she agreed to renounce the specificity of her sex, whose identity was imposed on her according to models that remained foreign to her" (*This Sex* 85).

Irigaray insists that a woman's social inferiority is reinforced and complicated by the fact that she does not have access to language, except through recourse to "masculine" systems of representation which misappropriate from her relation to herself and to other women (ibid). The symbolic order that regulated society would be seriously threatened if women, who had so far been commodities marked for consumption, were to become 'speaking subjects' as well, as

happened in the case of Kunti's daughter-in-law Draupadi, who had to undergo public molestation with no response from her so-called 'protectors'. The prejudice continues and is even today witnessed in the statements of perpetrators who insist that females who are bold enough to come out after dark deserve to be molested. The same is true of women who take a stand and speak against the establishment. Mahashweta Devi's *'Breast Stories'* questions the brutality of the organised crime committed by the state against subaltern women, with the prime tool of subjection being physical violation.

In Mahashweta Devi's short story 'Draupadi', a tribal woman, 'Dopdi' by name, is apprehended by the police and is subjected to beatings and violent sexual assault in order to make her speak and give away crucial information against her allies. But Dopdi, in a unique subversion of the disgrace and guilt associated with rape, baffles her captors by deflecting and aborting the shame. In her own unique way Devi describes how, after the gang-rape, a bloodied Dopdi refuses to be clothed. Her body is torn and bruised, yet her stance is defiant, which leaves the perpetrators baffled. In *The Mahabharata* Lord Krishna had prevented male lust from unclothing Draupadi, but Mahashweta's Dopdi, gangraped by police, refuses to be clothed by men in office, observes Spivak in the introduction to *'Breast Stories'*. Dopdi is an example of resistance against the brutality perpetrated by the system which believes in physically subduing and shaming the female into submission.

A close parallel can be drawn between Kunti, the chief mother-mourner in the Mahabharata, and Jashoda, the protagonist in 'Stanadayini (*Breast Stories* 46)' by Mahashweta Devi. Just as Kunti cannot imagine an existence other than the mother of the Pandavas, Jashoda too is a universal mother, being the wet nurse of the Haldar family. Trying their best to fit into the 'mother' archetype, both drew their value and sustenance by giving rather than getting, till they can give no more. Jashoda in "*Stanadayini*" is commissioned for breast-feeding the infants of the family in return for her keep. To remain a milch cow she has to be a yearly breeder. Kept

in a state of perpetual pregnancy to ensure milk for generations of Haldar babies, Jashoda's body finally caves in. When she is dying a lonely death because of breast cancer, not one of these sons, her real ones or the milk-sons, were nearby. Jashoda's helplessness as a gendered subaltern is evident: "If you suckle you are a mother, all lies! Nepal and Gopal don't look at me, and the master's boys don't spare a peek to ask how I'm doing. The sores on her breast kept mocking her with a hundred mouths, a hundred eyes" (*Breast Stories* 61). Jasoda dies alone, abandoned by her husband, her biological sons and her milk sons. Devi portrays Jashoda as a patriarchal construct, a fully Indian woman, whose unreasonable, unreasoning and unintelligent devotion to her husband and her children, whose unnatural renunciation and forgiveness have been kept alive in the popular consciousness by all Indian women (42). "Such is the power of the Indian soil that all women turn into mothers here and all men remain immersed in the spirit of holy childhood", writes Devi (*ibid*).

Analysing the pathetic outcome of the story Spivak suggests that 'Stanadayini' as the site of a critical deployment of Marxist-feminist thematic, reverses the representative generalisation, as by the logic of the production of value, both Jasoda and her husband Kangalicharan act as means of production, and by the logic of sexual reproduction, he is her means of production, as the field -beast or the beast of burden is the slaves' means of production. Spivak observes that Jashoda's predicament also undoes, by placing within a gender-construct, the famous Roman distinction, invoked by Marx, between 'instrumentum vocale' (the speaking tool – Jashoda, the woman-wife-mother) and 'instrumentum semi-vocale' (the working beast -Kangali, the man-husband-father (*Breast Stories* 78).

Spivak reports that one of the most important Marxist-feminist critiques of the Labour Theory of value is that it does not take sexual reproduction into account when speaking of social reproduction or the reproduction of labour power. In order to keep Jashoda in prime condition to produce surplus, the sexual division of labour is easily reversed, observes Spivak,



when Kanganalicharan, Jashoda's husband, was relegated to housework so that Jashoda's body produces a surplus that is consumed by the owners of her labour- power (ibid 80). Spivak finds the title "Stanadayini" powerful, as the word, translated, means "Giver of the breast", of the alienated means of production, the part-object, the distinguishing organ of the female as mother. "The violence of this neologism allows the cancer to become the signifier of the oppression of the gendered subaltern", notes Spivak (ibid 115). In Kunti's case the compulsion was to adhere to the 'patrilineality of the male kinship structures' (Bose 1), addicted as she was to the reflected glory and power that came with it.

Shorn of the decorations and imposed glory and martyrdom of motherhood, wearing her pain as a shroud, Kunti, the woman, who could not assert her personhood as a nubile young girl, overrules Kunti, the over-bearing, always correct Kshatriya Queen. While revisiting her past, she understands the immensity of her exploitation. Caught in the web of an androcentric, imperialistic design she becomes a tool of furthering the lust for power. Kunti, the mother, like 'Standayini' Jashoda of 'Breast Stories' (55), realizes very late that she as a woman has been left to bear the burden of a patriarchal guilt.

In Kunti's case, a woman's world of peace, creativity and nurturing was turned upside down to create a mirage of power through war. The epic successfully brings out the desolation that the fratricidal conflict left behind, and Kunti's last act of joining Dhritarashtra and Gandhari on their way to forest and renunciation shows her deep regret after the pathetic realization that patriarchal violence was not the answer to her predicaments. She recalls her role in the great war, where she, like Vidula, encourages her sons to claim what was theirs. In retrospect Kunti is unable to understand whether her act of inciting her sons towards bellicosity was right or should she have supported their pacifism and the demand for just five villages. Did she fulfil her Dharma?

This question is adequately answered by the Nishadin in Devi's re-telling when she insists that far from being a war to restore Dharma, the Mahabharata, like any other war, was an imperialistic strife that exploited the marginal. That Kunti herself was a marginal is something she gets to realize only in Devi's re-telling where she looks at the entire schema of things from a new perspective. Kunti, like Kadambini in Rabindranath Thakur's *'The Living and the Dead'* (*Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants and Rebels* 51), takes motherhood as a badge of honour, finding meaning and satisfaction out of it, only to be disillusioned at the end when she finds herself a 'persona non grata', not needed anymore as her utility is over, the value that she added to the lives of her progeny appropriated by others.

The widows Kadambini and Kunti have something in common – both try to find meaning in their lives through their off-springs. If for Kadambini the infant in question was her brother-in-law's son, in Kunti's case it was her co-sister's twins other than her own biological ones. Even husbands were mothered, as was Pandu by Kunti or Kandalicharan by Jashoda. But neither the King nor the Kandal (pauper) did justice to their respective spouses. Pandu, spurning Kunti, was united in death with Madri, his second wife. Jashoda's husband Kandalicharan, who had been fed on the money she earned by breast-feeding the Haldar babies, abandoned her to take a mistress called Golapi. Motherhood as a sentient feeling was so strong that Mahashweta Devi calls it a dependence. "Then Jashoda returned home, half crazed by the injustice of the world. But her heart couldn't abide the empty room. Whether it suckled or not, it's hard to sleep without a child at the breast. Motherhood is a great addiction," says Devi (*Breast Stories* 56).

"Re-vision, or the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entertaining an old text from a new critical direction, was for women more than a chapter of cultural history - it was an act of survival", said Adrienne Rich (*Writing as Re-Vision* 106). Kunti, the prisoner of the patriarchal construct, was released by Devi's re-telling, with the Nishadin acting as the guru

Kunti had never had. In a first, a subaltern guided a privileged Queen, the mother of the Pandavas, and allowed her to come to terms with her conscience. Rejecting the myth of the hard-hearted Queen Mother who took a conscious decision to eliminate the six innocent tribals, Devi's Nishadin finds Kunti an ordinary woman, confused, weary and plagued with self-doubts. Kunti's repentance for what had transpired was so intense that she chose death to the misery of self-introspection. The flames of the forest-fire were a welcome relief from the memories of a patriarchal war of annihilation, and her role in it. In death, Kunti appropriated the right to be her own person.



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