

## QUEEN OR PAWN: PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE INDIAN EPICS AND A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE



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Looking at the subject matter from comparative point of view helps create an academic field dealing with the study of literature and cultural experience across linguistic, national and disciplinary boundaries. While comparative outlook is mostly practiced with works of different languages, it may also be performed on works of the same language if the works originate from different nations and cultures among which that language is spoken. This paper wishes to explore the portrayal of women and power dynamics of gender. There certainly are parallels to be seen between the mythological epics of one country and the contemporary fiction of another. Ramayana and Mahabharata follow an androcentric narrative and are unfair in their treatment of the women characters. A Song of Ice and Fire, though belonging to the contemporary time, draws heavily from the literatures of yore and its portrayal of women is misogynist at best. Women of the epics and A Song of Ice and Fire are portrayed to be vile, corrupt and selfish; without much regard to their motivations and justifications. Women of the epics were not allowed to inherit property, or titles. A son would be the sole heir even if the daughter was older than him, capable than him. A woman's role was limited to being a daughter, a sister, a wife and a mother. Even fierce women like Kaikeyi,

Draupadi, Kunti are not allowed to be anything more than props in the male dominated society. This anguish and frustration at the system is one of the causes for these women's rebellion against the society that they inhabit. These women learn in early childhood to use any means possible to secure an ironclad future. . They are made aware early on in their lives that no man will ever think of their honour or virtue, unless it was convenient for him. People often blame Kunti for dividing Draupadi amongst her five sons, thus besmirching Draupadi's name for posterity. We forget that Kunti, having passed from one male to another, is protective of her sons and wants to secure the Hastinapur throne for them. She fears that Draupadi would break apart this unity and thus, diminishes her significance and influence from the onset. Kunti, as a mother, is fierce and driven. She is the driving force in her sons' lives. Women in the epics and A song of Ice and Fire are wholly dependent on the males in their lives for happiness and status. A widow like Kunti is considered everyone's property and ill treated by her family. She is aware that only her sons can give her any status in society and is thus, protective about them. Women, especially princesses and queens had to compromise in order to retain their position in the kingdom and family. Gandhari is one such queen who decides to stay with her blind husband even after his

betrayal and deception. Interestingly, Gnadhari is betrayed by her own family when they decide to get her married to a blind Dhritarashtra. The prerogative of the males to decide the fates of women is seen repeatedly in the epics. Gandhari is married off to the blind Dhritarashtra only because he is king. Marriages in the epics and A Song of Ice and Fire are politically driven and women are often used as leverage to secure political transactions. Cersei, from A Song of Ice and Fire, seems to be an amalgamation of Kunti and Gandhari. She is married for a political alliance and used as political leverage once she is widowed. The similarities, however, do not end here. Cersei, like Kunti and Gandhari, is intentionally blind to the shortcomings of her children and pushes them towards power knowing that it will corrupt them. She, like Kunti, feels threatened by a young Margaery Tyrell and her influence over her sons. This behavior may stem from the fact that she is completely dependent on her sons for happiness and status. She is a fierce and driven woman, who is denied the throne only because of her gender. Inheritance of crown, property and titles was a completely male prerogative. We see her using her sexuality in order to secure power and prestige. The politics of gender has been the most intriguing part of the epics. It is how Kaikeyi manages to ostracize Ram and secures the throne for her son. People often forget that the throne has already been promised to her as a marriage betrothal by Dasharath. Here, she is the one who is betrayed and yet wrongfully blamed. The portrayal of women in the epics has been misogynistic from every aspect. The epics try to portray an unreal woman who is to become the

epitome of womanhood and an ideal for women of the future generations. These women are often shown to be subservient, docile and accepting. However, a researcher always finds the subtleties of characterization and the ever present psychological nuances. We must examine the case of Draupadi in this regard. She is an unwanted child, because of her gender, considered useless in her father's plan of revenge. It can be argued that it is this rejection and absence of love from her father that leads her to become the instrument of destruction of the Kuru clan. As every child, she too aspires to make her father proud of her and possibly, subconsciously, seeks his approval through her revengeful actions. Her husbands' gamble her, disregarding her individuality. And yet, she continues to live with them. This shows the level of psychological docility and acceptance of one's fate on a fundamental level. In a time when women solely depended on males for protection of their virtue and honour, Draupadi's misfortune comes at the hand of her five warrior husbands. In her turn, she uses her feminine charm to manipulate her husbands into seeking revenge for her dishonor. She is blamed for causing the Kurukshetra war, though she is only one of the causes for it. The males definitely have ulterior motives to fight each other and make her their moral excuse. Similarly, Sita is blamed for the Ram-Raavan war. Ram is the ideal hero, who fights a war for his wife. But we forget that he abandons her just as easily. One is left to wonder about his ulterior motive in fighting Raavan and Sita being a natural consequence of that choice. The epics portray women as instrumental in causing these massive wars but a contemporary

scholar knows to look deeper. In a time when women were mere pawns, it isn't possible that they had the necessary importance to singlehandedly cause a war. The abduction of Sita and the defilement of Draupadi are only moral justifications for the wars of male supremacy. The epics legitimize using women as leverage for war, political gain and suppression. Similar apathy towards women is seen in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Daenerys is sold by her brother in marriage to a brute in return for the Dothraki army. Power and political gain were always at the heart of marriages in the epics and in this epic fantasy series. However, these docile and suppressed women eventually use their gender to gain power and prestige. Draupadi and Daenerys are very fierce heroines, who seek acceptance and legitimacy in a male dominated world; a world that denies them any real power and rejects to treat them as human beings. Their sexuality is their only weapon. Their existence is extremely gendered and they are only foils to their male counterparts. These women are more a pawn than a queen in the game of thrones and power. Yet, posterity remembers Sita and Draupadi to be the causes of the greatest wars of their times.

### Conclusion:

It is safe to say that the epics, written by men, about men and by men fail to give justice to the fierce and loyal women of those times. The characterization of these women is the root cause that these epics are still viewed as the benchmark in terms of portrayals of heroines in literature. A contemporary epic fantasy series too, falls short in its female characterization. The psyche of generations of readers has been trained to think

of Sita as the ideal woman and Draupadi as the model of what a woman should not be. Thus, while reading *A Song of Ice and Fire*, readers frown upon Daenerys and Cersei for being fierce and independent in a male dominated society. There are overlaps in all these narratives in regards to female characterization. This portrayal is definitely androcentric and unfair to women. These characters have more grey shades than mere black and whites and one must remember this while reading these texts.

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