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Introduction: 19th C English Women Novelists and their Impact

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I

The lives and works of a galaxy of women novelists who were born in the second decade of the 19th century like Elizabeth Gaskell in 1810, Charlotte Bronte in 1816, Emily Bronte in 1818, George Eliot in 1819 and Anne Bronte in 1820 deserve to be remembered and revisited. They pioneered, in the history of fiction, introducing, developing and nurturing new themes and attitudes in it, particularly, themes pertaining to women and their issues and their attitudes as well as the attitudes of the society to them. In spite of their short lives, they have left a rich legacy of what was virtually non-existent in England before them i.e in women's fiction. Virginia Woolf, commenting on the 19th Century fiction, writes in *A Room of One's Own* that the woman becomes much more various and complicated in fiction. These women novelists have made the greatest contribution in the direction of constructing such a varied and complex image of the woman. They fashioned remarkably the female Bildungsroman in English literature.

Elaine Showalter also begins her account of women writers in *A Literature of their Own* with these authors. She rightly feels that they represented the "feminine" phase of women's fiction. Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot "imitated and internalized" the "dominant male aesthetic standards". Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke do defy the norms of Victorian feminine code of conduct. Charlotte and Emily Bronte depict women's erotic feelings and passions. Neither Jane Eyre nor Catherine Earnshaw can be categorized as what Coventry Patmore called the "angel in the house." In fact, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, affirmed that the 19th century women writers had refused the debilitating cultural roles of angel and monster assigned to them by the Patriarchal society.

The sheer coincidence of Jane Austen expiring in 1817 also deserves a critical attention. Jane Austen is no longer regarded by all her critics as a pro-establishment writer who simply affirmed the existing values and institutions. In fact, she interrogated both the rigid class distinctions and the patriarchy, as both were still prevalent then. One has to look at these writers with Jane Austen lurking in the background as a point of departure.

Among their contemporaries across the Atlantic, Margaret Fuller emerged as an influential feminist. Nearer home, beyond the channel, George Sand led an unconventional life, openly flouting the traditional norms both in her life and in her writings: going through numerous liaisons, dressing like a man, smoking in public and writing about all this.



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In fact, the mid 19th century Europe saw the rise of the first wave of feminism. The new woman wanted to dress like a man, smoke a cigar and defy the norms of a constraining matrimony. The declaration of Women's Rights came in 1848, around which time, John Stuart Mill also wrote on the subjection of women.

All this is very relevant to India and elsewhere too, because in many ways, the conditions in India and elsewhere too parallel the situation of the Mid Victorian women even more than that of the Modern Western woman. The evil practice of Sati was made illegal by Lord William Bentinck during the colonial period. However, the Hindu Code Bill and the Dowry Act were passed as late as in 1950s. In spite of all these legal measures, the situation remains dismal for women even today. No doubt, the dowry deaths, triple *Talaks* and female fetus killings have declined today, but they have not ended and the gender equality has not become a reality even today. Similar is the case in the large number of third world countries also.

Indian women did not write novels except a couple of them in the 19th century. It was left to sympathetic male writers like Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee among a few others to depict their predicament in a highly patriarchal society. However, after independence, Indian women have been articulating their feelings in a big way in their novels both in English and the other Indian regional languages.

The national seminar organized in the Department of English & Comparative Literary Studies, Saurashtra University, Rajkot, in 2019, aimed at making a careful scrutiny of the lives and works of the English women novelists mentioned above in the wider social contexts. It tried to examine the novels by women as "Female Bildungsromans" and assess their handling of the themes of love, marriage, sex and divorce in the novels by women worldwide. It also deliberated on the depiction of religion as a bulwark of patriarchy and introduced rural and middle-class women in their novels and brought out the Governess novels. The seminar also aimed at making a study of the socio-economic contexts of the 19th Century England and the 21st Century India or any other nation comparatively. It took up the issues of these novelists and gynocriticism, the application of other feminist theories to these women novels, the classical protests on women's condition by Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill and the psychological approaches to women characters and their creators among other things. The seminar further deliberated on the revaluations of the 19th century English women novelists and their impact on the women novelists worldwide.



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None can deny that the novel as a form, as it has primarily developed in its present form, has come from the West. No doubt, the evidences of long prose narratives are available in India also and they belong to the time much before in past than one usually would believe. Banabhatt's *Kadambari* (1st half of the 7th century), Subandhu's *Vasavdatta* (2nd quarter of the 7th Century) and Dandi's *Dash Kumar Charita* (between 7th and 8th centuries) are available today in their English translations also and thus they make our task easy to examine them. They are not called, strictly speaking, the novels. They are rather fictional works of the romance type. Particularly, Dandi's *Dash Kumar Charita* narrates the stories of ten princes belonging to different parts of India. What is important, nevertheless, is that these stories are typically realistic in nature. They construct and represent in them the socio-political and cultural contexts quite effectively. In other words, the representation of the external realities is quite remarkable in them. They are typical stories of the 'lost and found' type, highlighting the adventures of the various princes, including their love adventures and their winning of the hearts of their beloveds.

If we look at the women as novel writers in India, we had to wait till the last quarter of the 19th century, when Toru Dutt wrote her novel *Bianca* (1878). In the early 20th century, Cornelia Sorabji also made a very remarkable contribution to the cause of women and their rights through her articles, treatises and stories as well as her two autobiographies.

The English education and the subsequent exposure to English literature and the literatures in English, particularly European classics, made a heavy impact on India as well as the third world countries and their literatures in general and women writers in particular. This impact can be seen on multiple aspects as stated above. They provided a new perspective on the lives of women and created a scope for understanding women differently and humanly and treating them accordingly. What was always overlooked was sensitized and a new awareness about women came among women as well as men. One can't say that men never wrote sympathetically for women and on their plights, still women needed to come out themselves more authentically on their state of affairs and suggest or propose some ways out. The women aspirations required to be articulated. They brought out in their works minute realities which made a lot of impact on their psyche. They provided new roles to them in their personal, domestic and social life.



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In regard to India, with its rich literary and critical traditions since ancient times, the case is slightly different from the other countries of the world. India had the traditions of public discourses on ancient epics like *The Ramayana*, *The Bhagvatpurana* and *The Mahabharata* etc. Further, they were not mere recitations of the narratives by the bards (folk narrative traditions), but critical deliberations on the issues and characters forming the content of these texts also. Thus, these texts were very much known to Indians at grassroot levels also. Another important thing about them is that these texts do have elaborate depiction of a large number of women characters. Some have got mythical touch also and many are widely known in their deviated forms also. Even the worldly matters like marriage, sex, mannerism, self-esteem, identity, rights and duties as well as the social, political, intellectual and emotional aspects of their existence and lives are also depicted elaborately in them.

These traditions of public discourses on these texts with various critical perspectives on them, unfortunately, came to be disrupted during the medieval periods due to foreign invasions on India by barbaric invaders. The Indian society got engaged in its battle for survival and preservation of its ancient and rich literature and culture. Due to that calamitous environment, the texts happened to remain confined to the communities, families, and individuals who studied them as a part of their social duty (i.e. 'profession' in today's terms) as a part of a cultural defense mechanism to protect and preserve them. Naturally, these narratives either went in to oblivion or got twisted due to ignorance and lack of verification in public.

Later on, in the 19th century, the European colonizers systematically tampered with these texts for their religio-political benefits and presented corrupted versions of these narratives and influenced negatively the perception of them on the part of the native Indians, particularly, the elite or the 'educated' dominant class. It generated such discourses out of them by perverting them that they succeeded in their mission of creating strong rifts within Indian society, affecting the privileged classes of people psychologically and intellectually. The end result was that the Indians started developing wrong interpretations of these texts i.e. the characters and their contexts in them and developed an inferiority complex about ourselves and whatever belonged to India as its legacy.

These 'intelligent' invaders constructed such versions of the ancient Indian texts for us to know which were convenient for them to sustain their rule over us. They have been, to a very extent successful also. Nevertheless, many individuals did study these texts closely and could arrive at other interpretations, aesthetic experiences and messages of them. The colonizers, however, did not allow such alternative



discourses to flourish more and they were challenged on different fictitious grounds by them as well as some Indian scholars also, finally successfully disrupting the intellectual environment of India.

Anyway, as far as women and their position and status in society are concerned, the ancient literature provides many instances of their realities and also the attitudes and perspectives of the wise and matured individuals (writers of the texts and characters in these texts) on them. For instance, there are many women characters in the two ancient epics of India, *The Ramayana* by Valmiki and *The Mahabharata* by Vyas, who do give useful insight into their status in the society then and also their awareness about themselves and their aspirations as women and individuals. The two ancient epics which have the most powerful impact on literatures of all the Indian languages, do provide pictures of women, many of whom are not 'traditional' (as understood today) or stereotypical. Their stories highlight the issues like their self-esteem, identity, their active role in love, marriage and sexual matters, their restoration to the same socio-cultural honour in spite of their abduction and humiliation by evil forces. Also, one would come across many other social activities then, in which the society is given the vision to sympathize with such women who had met with such a plight.

If we go to *The Ramayana* by Valmiki, we come across many women characters, some of whom I want to refer to here for this purpose are Shabari, Ahalya, Keikayi, and Sita. Their stories and the authorial attitude and perspective on them speak a lot about women and their role and status in the then society.

Shabari

She is commonly perceived as an under-privileged, tribal lady doing menial work in an Ashram. Her story occurs in the *Sarg* 74 of "Aranyakandam". What we see in the text is that Shabari has her Ashram like other Rishies. (4) She is described by Valmiki as a *Sidhdhaa*, that is one who has acquired various spiritual powers (6) and a *Shramani*, that is a sage and saintly figure (7). She is honoured by the other *Sidhdhas* also (10). Her impact on all the species there and the environment in that Matangvan (the name of that part of the forest) is immense and beyond one's imagination. She is staying all alone in her ashram in the dense forest for her ascetic pursuits. She is highly respected by all. Even the miscreants can't go there to create any kind of disruption or violence and that is her impact. The text mentions that even the tiger and the deer stay together once they enter that part of the forest. The birds are not afraid of either humans or other animals and birds. The fruits are exceptionally sweet there. Such is the status of a woman. Her being a tribal is just a coincidence and her being so does not make her a pitiable individual. She was highly respected and allowed



to have access to various spiritual powers. Even her being a woman does not disqualify her for unconventional pursuits, which are supposed to be for men. She is not forced to perform the traditional roles of women. Thus, she was not a sweeper in the Ashram, but one of the disciples of the Rishi Matang and was herself a *Sidhdha* like other male Rishies and disciples of Rishi Matang. She also offers proper guidance to Ram and Laxman for their search for Sita. (The number written into brackets refer to the couplet numbers in the text)

Ahalya

Her story occurs in the *Sargs* 48-49 of the *Balkandam* of *The Ramayan*. She is commonly perceived as the one whom her husband, like a typical patriarch, did a lot of injustice by ill-treating and punishing her without any error on her part. The common perception is that she is a victim of a typical patriarchal humiliation of her, because she was cursed to be a stone. The textual reality is however quite different. When they were on the way to Mithilapuri of King Janak, Ram happens to ask the sage Vishwamitra about a deserted Ashram in the outskirts of Mithilapuri. Vishwamitra then narrates the entire account of what had happened.

The story runs thus that she stayed there in that Ashram with her husband, Gautam, very happily. She had no point of complain or grievance against him. Once, when Gautam had gone out, the King of Heaven, Indra, comes there in disguise of Rishi Gautam himself, because he was sexually attracted by the rare beauty of her. Also, he wanted to disturb the penance of Gautam by provoking his anger. Thus, there is a conspiracy also. However, Ahalya is a powerful and empowered lady and hence she is able to identify him as Indra. She knows well that he was not her husband. However, typically human, she feels proud that Indra has got attracted to her, in spite of having so many Apsaras (nymphs) in his court who are known for their distinguished beauty. So, she conveys to him also that she has identified him, but also consents to sleep with him. (48:19) Then, she thanks him also, but at the same time, fearing the anger of her husband, she asks Indra to leave the Ashram before her husband returns and curses both of them. (48:20-1) Exactly, that happens and upset by the incident, Gautam curses both of them, not just Ahalya. His curse to Indra is even more severe. The point to be noted however is that the Rishi is not angry on the woman only. He rather consoles her also that Ram would liberate her by making her free from the impact of his curse of remaining invisible to others. When liberated, she would again go back to him and live with him in the new Ashram as happily as expected (48:32).



When she becomes visible to Ram there in the Ashram, first of all, along with Laxman, Ram touches the feet of Ahalya (49:17). It is not a small happening because just after listening about her account and her fault or human error, the epic hero touches her feet. The epic hero Ram touches the feet of a character, who has a very minor role in the epic, because this incident is used for highlighting the value-system of Ram. In contemporary sense, she had 'betrayed' Rishi Gautam. But Ram does not evaluate her on the basis of that moment of her weakness. Her atonement is acknowledged in the text and Rishi Gautam is also described as having been pleased for reuniting with Ahalya (49:21) The issues that arise here are where is sexual or gender discrimination here? How would one respond to reaction and action of the epic hero? Which type of value system is being encouraged by the text? The answers to these questions are self-explanatory with regard to women, their roles, and social response to them.

Kaikeyi

Kaikeyi is a major character in the epic. Her story which I want to highlight occurs in the *Sarg* 9 of *Ayodhyakandam*. She was the favorite Queen of King Dashrath. She had accompanied her husband, King Dashrath, in the battlefield also. Not only that but she had played the challenging role of his charioteer (driver) in the battlefield and saved him when he was injured seriously by the Rakshasas. (16) Had she not done so, he would have certainly died. As a token of appreciating her brave act, the King offers her two boons. Now, the first point to be noted here is that a woman is doing something which is considered today as the role of men only. The King did not object to her participation in the battle and made her his charioteer, which is not a small task; Krishna had played that role in the Kurukshetra war. King Dashrath did not humiliate her by saying that she was a woman and she better took care of 'the children and home' and pray for his safety and victory.

As the story goes ahead, we know that, due to evil guidance of her chief maid, Manthara, she demands those two boons on the very eve of the Coronation Day of Ram as the Crown Prince. Further, Ram was being coronated absolutely as per the norms and traditions. The second point to be noted here is that, on hearing these shocking demands of replacing Bharat as the Crown Prince and sending Ram to forest for 14 years, the husband King ('the chief and all-powerful patriarch') does not imprison, punish or kill her. This would have otherwise easily occurred in a patriarchal society, particularly in the royal palaces, where such power games of political assassinations have been taking place. The human history is full of such events.



None was a witness to her demanding of the boons. Moreover, all the courtiers and even the people would have upheld such a punishment to her for her demand with regard to Ram, as he was so dear to all and he was also well-deserving the position. The third point to be noted more importantly is that the King didn't even think that she was a woman and he was not supposed to heed to her demand, particularly when it was unjust. Rather, he tries to convince her to demand something else, and not to punish Ram that way. On the contrary, absolutely unpolitically, the word given to her in past is honoured by the King at the cost of so many more precious things and persons. This shows that there is no gender discrimination; neither there is subordination of her.

Thus, the king does not silence Kaikeyi, but pleads her to rethink. Otherwise, it is normally perceived and described by the feminists that the patriarchal society silences woman and uses her for furthering his interests. On his failure in influencing her to rethink, he accepts her demands and implements them, though it was fatal for himself. This speaks of her status, impact and power, in spite of her being a woman. Further, when the male approves of it, that shows the societal attitude to women, i.e. respecting the promise given to her, even if it was very tough to do so or manageable differently. But, no such attempt is made to change her mind forcibly. Her role reveals the strength and weakness of her as a person the way they are described in case of male characters. Later, even Bharat is asked by Ram not to look at her mother with any grudge in future. The question is where is the presence of double standards in the society, one for male and other for female here?

Sita

It is observed that in a patriarchal society, Sita is an ideal wife, who accompanies her husband in his exile into the forest and takes all the pains though she was not expected to do so. She shows her togetherness with her husband. The most dangerous villain, Ravana, kidnaps her. He offers many lucrative temptations to her. When he does not succeed in it, even threatens her for the most terrorizing consequences, but she does not succumb to that. She does not surrender to him, in spite of no visible chance of her getting liberated from there. She spends more than a year in his confinement, but she resists all sorts of tactics of Ravana. This shows how strong is she as a person and woman. This is not her slavish mentality of remaining subservient to her husband, but her love for him.



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Later, after she is liberated from the confinement and brought in front of Ram, to her surprise and utter shock, Ram tells her that he has liberated her and now she is free to choose the course of her life herself (no doubt it was a calculated and farsighted strategy on the part of Ram), Sita's self-respect makes her ask tough questions to Ram also. It shows that she is not a submissive woman that she would accept every word of her husband without questioning. She is conscious of her identity as a human being having self-respect and expected others to acknowledge it. All know that she was ready to do anything for Ram even die for him before she heard these words of Ram. However, here she reacts and challenges Ram's attitude very strongly. It is she who asks Laxman to prepare a pyre, as she did not want to survive any more, if her self-esteem was being sacrificed. (Sarg 115-6, *Yudhdhakandam*)

Ram's address to Sita in public is quite disturbing and humiliating to Sita. (Canto 115, *Yudhdhakandam*) In canto 116, she gives a very emotionally charged and rationally powerful answer to Ram. She tells him that he has talked to her like a low category man talking to a low category of woman. She adds that she has remained faithful to him under all circumstances. She tells him that she can have control over her heart and her heart has always been for him only. She can't have control over her body and hence, Ravana could kidnap her and also touched her body, but for that how could she be held responsible, as she was helpless against the mighty Ravana? She then with anger and disappointment tells Ram that she has spent so many years with him and yet he has not understood her well, which is as good as the death to herself. She feels that if that was how he thought, he should have conveyed his mind through Hanuman when he came in search of her. In that case, she would have ended her life in front of him only. She adds that that would have saved him from taking so much of trouble in coming to Lanka with a mammoth army to defeat Ravana and avoiding massacres on both sides. She further says that he has not paid attention to the unique qualities of herself. She says that she is not just any woman; rather, he has married her. He has seen how much she has loved him all through, but he has ignored everything and assessed her wrongly on the basis of how an ordinary woman acts in similar situations. (115: 15-16). It needs to be marked that she does not at all beg for mercy of Ram. She does not even ask him to forget past and excuse her. She does not say, where would she go. On the other hand, surprisingly and shockingly, she asks Laxman to prepare a big pyre, as she was no more willing to continue her life. That is her way of protesting and rejecting her treatment. (Ram neither asked nor even suggested to her for the fire test as it is believed by the people) And then we know what happens. She emerges out of the fire absolutely safe. In canto 118, the God Agni comes out with Sita totally safe and tells Ram about Sita. (5-10)



In his response to the words of Lord Agni, Ram utters what he really thought of Sita and how much faith he had on her. He had no doubt about her integrity, but to make the people realize the piety and dignity of Sita, he had deliberately acted and uttered such words. He knew very well the true character of Sita. (118:13-20) He did not want to leave any scope for people to malign Sita in future on that issue. He was proved right and farsighted also, because in spite of that the people of Ayodhya did raise the issue of her integrity.

The depiction of Sita's personality and character is done further in the Canto 96 of the "Uttarkandam". The readers come to know another important aspect of her personality that she was not the traditional, weak and meek woman. When Ram realizes that Lav and Kush are the sons of Sita, he sends a message to Valmiki if Sita would come to the court of Ram and pronounce with an oath in public about her character, so that the misunderstanding in the public mind can be removed. Valmiki approves the proposal of Ram and next day goes to the court with Sita. Valmiki (not just the poet but a character also in the text) himself speaks so highly about her. (96:13-24) (The critics can't ignore the fact that all major voices of the revered and respected people speak in favour of her. None is patriarchal in attitude) Then, he invites Sita to speak on oath about her character and her sons. A very important point to be noted in the text here is that before Sita comes forward and speaks anything, Ram apologizes to her in public that under the impact of public opinion, he had renounced Sita after she was brought to him when the war was over. She had then already given the evidence of her piety in front of so many Rishies and others. (97: 4-5)

How Sita will take an oath is a mystery for all. She speaks that, if she is pious and pure in every respect, the Goddess Earth should take her into her own fold and give space to her within herself (97:14-6). That exactly happens also. She gives proof in such a manner that the entire world is left in an unspeakable state. She does not any more stay in the human world, which is so unpredictable and irrational. She surprises and shocks all with her symbolically very heavy slap on their face. Anyway, she tells the world about her innocence second time, but she least cares for that society anymore now and gets dissolved into the earth. IN other words, she does not take the oath to gain anything including the happiness of royal family life with her dear ones. This slap on the face of the world is unatonable and inerasable.

At that time, Ram is also shocked and so first warns and then requests the mother earth either to return Sita to him or take him also with her (98: 8). This speaks of the stature of her character and role. Thus, Sita is gentle, soft spoken, cooperative, but not fearful, submissive and without self-esteem. She is able to speak and do what is expected from an independent-minded, strong and courageous woman protagonist in the



contemporary literatures.

III

The Mahabharata presents even large number of female characters who happen to have the qualities normally found in the strong female protagonists in the feminist works these days. Also, they are not portrayed just as the victims of the patriarchy as we find them being discussed in the feminist writings today. I would like to offer a few of them as case studies to examine what is stated in this paper. These characters are Satyavati, Amba, Gandhari and Draupadi.

Matsyagandha or the Queen Satyavati (*Adi Parva*)

She was a daughter of the head of the fisherman called Dashraj, who belonged to the Nishad community (a backward and underprivileged community today). The King of Hastinapur, Shantanu, feels attracted to her. In other words, the mighty King of the biggest empire has fallen in love with an ordinary lady, but he does not send his soldiers to bring her for him, but rather he seeks the consent of her father for marrying her. Contrary to the common expectations of readers, her father has some terms and conditions for the marriage. He wants the King to promise him that only her son and then her son's son would inherit the throne of Hastinapur, because he knew that Shantanu already had a son called Devavratt. The point to be noted is that an ordinary woman (comparatively much lower in status) is putting conditions for marriage to the King of the greatest Empire then and the marriage takes place only after the King's side accepting the conditions. (*"Adi Parva"*: 100)

Satyavati, as a widow, later on loses her sons also without their leaving any child as an heir to the throne. At such a difficult time, she is capable of taking bold political decisions as a Queen. She does not become a helpless and pitiable woman. She first requests Bhishma to be the King himself and have a family, as it was not against the *dharma*. She also makes him free from the bond/oath. When he denies that, she requests him to father an heir to the widows of Vicitravirya, but he does not accept that too. She is now required to decide who should father an heir to any of the Queens of Vicitravirya, following the tradition of *Niyoga*. She chooses to invite Ved Vyas for that. Actually, such a privilege is not available to women in a typical patriarchal society. As per the commonly perceived state of patriarchy, a widow becomes absolutely powerless to decide anything even for herself. However, here, Satyavati is independent, bold and capable of taking political decisions too. She knows how to take a crucial decision and how to do what she proposes to



do, taking all concerned into confidence. She also knows how to do the essential things without violating the ethical or moral codes. Thus, she is a very powerful, sharp and independent minded lady.

Amba:

Amba is the princess of Kashya, the King of Kashi. She is won by Bhishma in her *swayamvar* for his step brother and King of Hastinapur, Vicitravirya. Later on, when Amba tells him that she had made up her mind to marry Salva with mutual consent of him, immediately, unlike a typical and arrogant patriarch, Bhishma makes her free from marrying Vicitravirya, because ethically, a woman can't be forced for marriage against her consent. The remarkable point is that Amba is able to convey her mind to the patriarch like the new woman of contemporary time. She has her own choice regarding her marriage. Of course, later on, what happens is sad that Salva refuses to accept her as a wife now and she feels forlorn. She decides to take revenge on Bhishma thinking him to be responsible for her plight (She takes revenge on him as Shikhandi). Anyway, she shows her fearlessness against Bhishma too. She is firm and determined in her love for Salva, though, sadly, he proves to be very weak and orthodox. She does not get tempted to be a queen of the Hastinapur King, nor does she get reconciled to her fate like other women in patriarchal society due to helplessness.

Gandhari

Gandhari is another powerful woman in *The Mahabharata*. When after the *vastraharan* incident, the most complex and potentially volcanic reality arises, she comes forward and shows her power and wisdom to manage it and establish reconciliation between the two antagonised parties of the Pandavas and Kauravas. The potential fierce war was almost neutralized by her. Unfortunately, another game of dice takes place and the seed of conflict gets replanted. Otherwise, the possibility of a fierce war was already ruled out by Gandhari so well.

After her horrifying humiliation in the royal court of Dhritrashtra, Draupadi was very sad and angry both. None had courage to come forward and respond to her question. The Duryodhan & Co. was making fun of all the Pandavas and letting none to take their side in the court. Draupadi was feeling utter pain and humiliation. Anything was possible to take place. At that crucial time, Gandhari along with Vidura succeeds in convincing her husband and the King to return everything back to Draupadi and Pandavas. Thus, all the five Pandavas are made free from the bondage of slavehood, their kingdom of Indraprastha along with all



the wealth is also returned. What is very important to note is that she courageously goes against her sons, particularly Duryodhana and Dushashan, and his aids like her brother, Shakuni, Karna and even her husband, Dhritrashtra. No one was otherwise coming forward to speak in favour of Pandavas and Draupadi. Gandhari courageously does it and lashes on the wrong doers. She undoes, for the time being, the injustice inflicted on Pandavas. None including Dhritrashtra is able to oppose her, though he was never in favour of what he had to do. This shows her power. She restores everything and that shows her political sense and wisdom as well as her readiness to use them at the time of crises. Which woman would do it or has done in the history, mythology or literature i.e. this act of neutralizing all the conspiring forces at one go? This is not a small achievement. It demands a lot of courage, willingness and wisdom on the part of individual. That is what she displays. It is an absolutely unorthodox role of a woman. Further, she is not at all helpless in the patriarchal framework. (Sabhaparva: 70). Even when Yudhisthira is summoned again for the game of dice, she is very angry and expresses her disappointment with all, particularly Duryodhana. (Sabhaparva: 75)

Later on, when Krishna comes for negotiation with the Kauravas, there is a heated discussion in the court. All try to convince Duryodhan to accept the proposal being offered by Krishna, but he listens to none in the court including his father, the King. At one point, he leaves the court insulting all. At that time, Dhritrashtra expresses his desire to call the politically intelligent Gandhari to talk to Duryodhan and bring him back in the court to have negotiations with Krishna. Gandhari does bring him back to the court and tells him what was wise for him. She uses many bitter words also for him. It shows how shrewd she is. She, mentioning names of different persons trying to persuade him, tries to bring Duryodhan to the ground reality. She expresses her anger over Duryodhana. She tells the King also that he has also been responsible for what has come to. Thus, Ved Vyas has portrayed her character very boldly. (*Udyogparva*: CXLVIII)

Draupadi

Draupadi is the most powerful woman character of *The Mahabharata*. One of her names is Yajnaseni, which represents her temperament. After her humiliation, she raises the question of the dignity and self-esteem of a woman i.e. whether she can be won or lost? She also raises the moral and ethical aspects of the issue. She, in spite of her being all alone, resists and fights with Dushashan and later with the court and makes everyone feel ashamed of what the Duryodhana & Co had done. We also see that she doesn't tolerate nonsense of anyone whether Duryodhana, Dushashan, Karna, Jaydrath and Kichak at different points of time in the text. Even when Arjun marries and brings Subhadra as his wife, in spite of Subhadra's being the sister



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of Krishna, Draupadi does not approve of it. She takes it as her insult and is not willing to excuse Arjun. Arjun has to persuade and please her to accept Subhadra. Even Krishna has to talk to her to make her accept Subhadra, who, he says, would never take her place. Thus, she is full of life and her self-respect is always high in her life. She is one of the forces that keep the Pandavas reminded of their commitment to dharma and justice. Her untied hair keep on reminding them that they have to punish all the culprits as they deserved.

Thus, she is not at all meek and passive as a woman. She does not approve of men who do not have manners to behave with women. She can raise her voice without being unnecessarily shy against anyone. She can raise her voice against Bhishma and other elders also by asking their stand on the crucial issue about her self-respect and high morality among the royal family members. She can be angry on her husbands also. She can teach a hard lesson to Kichak and Jayadrath. She can encourage her husbands and sustain their commitment to Dharma and ethics. She also emerges as the true rescuer of the Pandavas from the worst condition of their slavery to Duryodhan for ever. Ved Vyas has drawn a really illustrious and inspiring character of Draupadi, rather than just a passive beautiful woman doing nothing, nor aspiring for anything great in life.

In spite of having models of great women in ancient Indian literatures, one can't deny the fact that the 19th century women novelists did play a decisive role in altering the writings of the women in favour of new women having their own identity and assertion of it in one way or the other.



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