



The Ironical Undertones Of The Story Of Mādhavī In The Mahābhārata

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Abstract

Over the years Mahābhārata, the great Indian epic, has been exerting deep influence on the life and psyche of large sections of people of the Indian sub continent. Numerous life situations have been portrayed in the epic with picturesque details. The characters in the epic no more appear to us as remote shadows. They live and pervade like real beings in a thousand situations of our daily life. A deep perusal of the epic reveals that the epic has a number of major and minor female characters who appears as telling examples of the unending miseries into which they are thrown solely because they happen to be women and solely because each episode is portrayed from a male gaze. The story of Mādhavī constitutes one such episode which has several undertones in it regarding the predicament of women. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the story of Mādhavī within modern feministic Perspectives.

Keywords:

Mādhavī, Gālava, Viśvāmitra, predicament, patriarchal, authority, staked, Yayāti, sojourn, virgin, Haryaśva, Divo dāsa, Uśīnara, pawn, silent, agonising, eloquent, protest, mistreated, untold sorrows, women folk, Vadhūsarā, chasteness, loyalty.

Story of Mādhavī

The story of Mādhavī is a quite well known one in the epic. It occurs in the Gālavacarita episode of the Udyogaparva (Udyogaparva, Chs. 112-120). Gālava was the disciple of sage Viśvāmitra. As he finished his education under Viśvāmitra, Gālava, with due respect to his preceptor asked him as to what he must offer as gurudakṣiṇā or the preceptor's fees. The sage, out of affection towards Gālava, told him that he was not very particular to receive any fees from him. But Gālava insisted that he would be given an opportunity to offer due gurudakṣiṇā. In a moment of displeasure, as it were, Viśvāmitra asked him to bring eight hundred white horses to him with one ear of black hue. Such stories wherein one sees the disciple's persistence and the subsequent annoyance on the part of the preceptor prompting him to ask a somewhat difficult offer as gurudakṣiṇā keeps recurring in several puranic episodes. One well known example is that of Kautsa which is described in the fifth sarga of Raghuvamśa. Gālava was in a dilemma now. He not knew where he could have eight hundred white horses with one ear of black colour. However he made up his mind to share his difficulty with somebody and so Gālava told everything to Garuda who directed him to Yayāti, the well

known monarch of lunar dynasty. Yayāti was also in a state of hardship, for his wealth had waned. So he had neither the horses nor the wealth to help Gālava. But he unhesitatingly gave his beautiful daughter, Mādhavī, to Gālava by the help of whom perhaps he can fulfil his promise to Viśvāmitra. Gālava was now felt a bit relieved, for he thought that he could somehow earn the horses with the help of Yayāti's daughter.

Gālava took Mādhavī to Haryaśva, the king of Ikṣvāku race. He presented Mādhavī as a gift to Haryaśva and asked for the eight hundred white horses with one ear in black hue. But to Gālava's misfortune, Haryaśva had only two hundred such horses. Gālava was again in difficulty, for he thought how he could earn the six hundred remaining horses if he was to present Mādhavī to Haryaśva. Mādhavī came to his help. She told Gālava that she would stay with Haryaśva for one year until a son is born to them after which Gālava could take her to other kings for collecting the remaining six hundred horses. Mādhavī consoled Gālava saying that after each sojourn, she will remain a virgin. Gālava was happy and after a son was born to Mādhavī and Haryaśva, Gālava took her to king Divodāsa of Kāśī with whom she stays for a period of one year. Gālava received two hundred more horses from Divodāsa. After a son was born to them, Gālava took Mādhavī to king Uśīnara and received another two hundred horses from him. After a son was born to them, Gālava came to know that there were no more such horses in the universe and he presented those six hundred horses to Viśvāmitra and requested him to be pleased to receive the six hundred horses instead of the eight hundred ones. To his surprise, Viśvāmitra, the so called great sage also wanted to stay with Mādhavī for a period of one year. Mādhavī also bore a son for Viśvāmitra. So during the course of four years, Mādhavī had to be the consort of four different persons and she became a mother four times. After begetting the fourth son to Viśvāmitra, Mādhavī returned to Yayāti who arranged for her marriage. She refused and said she would like to be wedded to the forest and in the next moment she disappeared to the woods.

Undertones of the Story

The story of Mādhavī in the epic assumes significance in the light of the pitiable predicament of women referred to at several places in the epic. King Yayāti, her father, does not ask for her permission before being given over to Gālava to be staked to various persons. And the father in Yayāti does not see anything wrong in it given the general social situation shaped and formulated by the principles of Dharmaśāstra which seemed to be governed by a system of patriarchal authority. Such a system has a smile of victory on its face when Mādhavī herself mouths a solution for Gālava's difficulty by giving permission to be staked to various persons and beget sons for them. The pivotal aspect of the story is encircled in Mādhavī's remaining a virgin after her each sojourn with different consorts. There is yet another more moving aspect to the story. Mādhavī bears a son for each of the four persons with whom she stayed for a period of one year as their wife. That means that she had no time to fondle her child and as soon as she delivered, she was deprived of her position as a mother because it was time for her to be taken to another person. She had no right over her child and she was just a pawn or plaything in the hands of a society in which everything seemed to be determined and executed by a male dominated system of governance which was deaf and dumb to decipher even the so called sublime norms and principles attached to motherhood. The four sons belonged not to her, but to their fathers. She had no role except to be a veritable means for giving birth to four sons during the span of four years. The only hint in the story about Mādhavī's agonising and silent protest is the expression of her reluctance to take part in the marriage arranged for her by her father after having lived with four persons in four years. The children were not living with her and despite being the mother of four sons, Mādhavī was destined to be an orphan and hence her silent disappearance into the forest. So the epic author leaves behind enough hints to let one have an awareness of Mādhavī's silent but eloquent protest towards a society which mistreated her like an object not being considered a human being even once in a story in which the major players were all males namely her own father, the learned disciple Gālava and his great preceptor Viśvāmitra as well as three other ones who were supposed to be the responsible protectors of their subjects.

Several instances as the ones described above are seen in the Mahābhārata. The epic author describes how a virtual river was formed by name Vadhūsarā by the incessant shedding of tears by Paulomā who had to suffer a lot from the male world around her despite the fact that she was carrying and under the protection of a powerful sage. (Ādiparva. Paulomaparva section. Chs. 5-7) Such symbolic reference about the untold sorrows of women folk is significant and it adds to the graver dimensions of the epic. The experiences undergone by women characters like the ones mentioned above cannot be considered as accidental happenings. The tone and tenor of some of the principles of the Dharmaśāstra literature which get reflected in the epic at several places is generally quite unfriendly to women though there are occasional descriptions with full of hollow praise for women for their chasteness and loyalty to husbands.

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