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Book Review

Book :	The Women of the Mahabharata, The Question of Truth
Author :	Chaturvedi Badrinath
Genre :	Literature/Philosophy/Religion
Publisher :	Orient Longman
Year of Publication :	2008
Pages :	276 Pages
Cost :	Rs. 395/-

Women in a contemporary retelling of *Mahabharata*

The Mahabharata in the Indian psyche is the most infallible source of *dharma*. The term ‘*Dharma*’ is to be interpreted in the larger context of a ‘code’ of conduct.

Chaturvedi Badrinath interpolates philosophy and literature to reinterpret the lives of women in the Vedic age to drive home an understanding of contemporary times, society as a larger whorl and women in particular. He undertakes to trace the ‘woman’ in her anthropological, archetype forms so as to bring about an objective enquiry in conjunction with an implicit subjectivity.

It serves as an apt sequel to the first book *The Mahabharata: An Inquiry into Human Condition* (Penguin, 2005). Everyday concerns of life pertaining to *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha* were explored in their simplicity as well as complexity in the first book. The natural progress in terms of a narrative had to be a dialogue upon women who occupy a central place in society.

The Women of the Mahabharata is a compilation of twelve stories about women who live in the *dwapar yuga*, the time of the *Mahabharata*. In the exegesis of their life is shown, a truth, in which a woman must locate herself. However, this is not a simple derivation and no categorical statement can be made upon it. Each one of the female characters formulate their own

philosophy and serve a precept to mankind upon ‘truth’ and ‘goodness’, myriad as they are in their dimensions

The twelve women of the *Mahabharata* whose life stories make up this book feature chronologically. The characters range from *Shakuntala*, *Savitri* and *Damayanti* whose lives are sketchy in public memory. Characters like *Sulabha*, *Suvarchala*, *Uttara Disha*, *Madhavi* and *Kapoti* who are hardly known are placed alongside the dazzling *Draupadi*, who though known widely remains a monolith.

In this stead Chaturvedi Badrinath is at par with writers like Pratibha Ray Chitra Divakurmi Banerjee and Devdutt Patnaik who have attempted contemporary retellings of the *Mahabharata*. The women of the *Mahabharata* as portrayed by Chaturvedi are incarnate in the women of today. The stories contribute to project the picture of a modern’s woman as refracted and gleaned from the twelve stories. The book makes demands upon the contemporary men to reflect on these women’s perceptions, attitudes and pretensions, when they ask the men in their lives to do the same be it kings or sages, the true patriarchs.

Badrinath’s ability to combine human emotions with scholarship makes his book an appealing manuscript to the modern reader. The only inherent weakness of the delineation of the women characters remains to be Badrinath’s inability to transcend gender barriers. His take remains, undeniably, a man’s narrative unlike Pratibha Ray and Chitra Divakurmi Banerjee who are able to render the inner consciousness of a woman on their canvas. Chaturvedi in this context, for the most part remains totally defeated in his venture. He redeems himself because his retelling does transform the reader’s experience of the *Mahabharata* and a deserving claimant of the Sahitya Academy Award.

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