

The Lamentation of Women in the Mahābhārata: A Moral Reading of the Strī Parvan

Dr. Geetesh Nirban

Associate Professor,
Department of Philosophy,
Kamala Nehru College, Delhi
Email Id: gnirban@knc.du.ac.in

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21731605>

Abstract

The *Strī Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* is important because it centres on women, yet it explores this through themes of grief, which are the lamentations of wives, mothers, and daughters on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra. It reflects the repercussions of battle/war. This write-up considers the *Strī Parvan* as a morally significant narrative that presents women's mourning in this section of the epic as not only emotional but also as a moral critique of war and power dynamics. Through close analysis of Gāndhārī, Kuntī, and Draupadī, the article explores how grief functions as a moral category in the *Mahābhārata*. It also explicates how the *śreyas-preyas* distinction reveals Dhṛtarāṣṭra's moral failings. Ultimately, the article suggests that, at its core, the *Strī Parvan* reflects on the costs of abandoning *dharma* to adopt war while highlighting who bears the real brunt. It presents the moral landscape of the war while prompting moral reflection.

Keywords: *Strī Parvan*, *Mahābhārata*, *dharma*, *Gāndhārī*, *śreyas*, *preyas*, moral failing, lamentation, grief.

1. Introduction of Parvan on Women and Its Contextual Significance

The *Strī Parvan* as 'Book of Women', is not a display of the grandeur of the *Mahābhārata*.ⁱ It serves as a repository of sorrow rather than of celebration. It begins when the Kurukṣetra battle is over and fighting has ceased. The battlefield is filled with corpses, blood is flowing all over, and the air is heavy with the cries of survivors. King Dhṛtarāṣṭra, along with Gāndhārī and the widows of the fallen soldiers, approaches this scene of tragedy. This setting is physical but morally charged because the *Mahābhārata* acknowledges that every battlefield is a landscape of moral consequences, thus demanding moral reflection.

This article considers the women in the *Strī Parvan* as active moral witnesses. They are not passive mourners. Their grief reflects heightened awareness rather than a lack of thought. Since the *Mahābhārata* primarily revolves around *dharma*, these women raise essential moral questions that the epic itself struggles to deal with. These are questions beyond the capacity of

victors to answer, and those defeated are too shattered to even raise them. The central questions are—Was the Kurukṣetra battle justified? Which *dharma* was actually served by the destruction it caused? Who ultimately bears the cost when kingdoms are built on the bodies of the dead? The *Mahābhārata* does not ignore these questions. Sañjaya provides a harrowing account of the earth’s condition after the battle:

*aṣṭādaśa akṣauhiṇyaḥ hatāḥ daśa ca viśāmpate |
nirjaneyaṃ vasumatī śūnyā santi kevalā ||*

“Eight and ten Akṣauhiṇīs of warriors, O king, have been killed. The Earth has become desolate and is almost empty now.” (*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 1.6)ⁱⁱ

The earth is described here as *nirjaneyaṃ*, meaning depleted or exhausted. The *Mahābhārata*’s use of this term to depict the earth after the war suggests a deep philosophical view that Kurukṣetra symbolises more than a human tragedy—it reflects a cosmic one. Into this drained and empty world, the women of the *Strī Parvan* enter, and their questions carry moral weight because they arise from this state of moral depletion.

2. Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s blind affection as a mirror of moral failings

A detailed examination of the *Strī Parvan* ought to begin with Dhṛtarāṣṭra, since his faults tend to be the cause of the catastrophic war, and the *Parvan* explicitly emphasises this point. He is devastated by the war’s effects and accepts that all moral figures in the *Mahābhārata*—Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Vidura, Vyāsa, and Kṛṣṇa—had already warned him. He admits and regrets his failure to heed their advice:

*na kṛtaṃ suhr̥dāṃ vākyaṃ jāmādagnyasya japataḥ |
nāradasya ca devar̥ṣeḥ kṛṣṇa-dvaipāyanasya ca ||*

“I did not follow the advice of friends, of Jamadagni’s son, of the celestial Ṛṣi Nārada, and of Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana.” (*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 1.13)

In his own confession, Dhṛtarāṣṭra admits it was not his ignorance but the negligence to listen to others because of which he preferred *lobha* (greed, attachment) over *viveka* (discriminative wisdom) (*Mbh. Strī Parvan*, 1.10-20). Within the tradition of Indian philosophy, Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s actions resonate with the understanding of choosing *preyas* over *śreyas* — of the immediately pleasurable over the genuinely good. The *Kaṭhōpaniṣad* describes this as the fundamental moral compass in every human life: *anyacchreya’nyadutaiva preyaste ubhe nānārthe puruṣaṃ sinītaḥ* | “(Death said) One is good while another is pleasant. These two, serving different ends, bind men” (*Kaṭhōpaniṣad*, 1.2.1). Dhṛtarāṣṭra chose the pleasure of his son’s

happiness over the good of his kingdom and his people. It is in this way that the *Strī Parvan* turns into an account of what that choice of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the father, cost the whole kingdom. Kṛṣṇa spoke to Dhṛtarāṣṭra before the Pāṇḍavas came to offer obeisance. He tells him categorically that counsel had come from every quarter to Dhṛtarāṣṭra but it was refused by him:

*uktavān stvām̐ tadaivāhaṃ bhīṣma-droṇau ca bhārata |
vidurāḥ sañjayaścaiva vākyaṃ rājan na tat kṛthāḥ ||*

“I spoke to you before the battle. Both Bhīṣma and Droṇa, O Bhārata, did the same, as also Vidura and Sañjaya. You did not, however, then care to follow our advice.”(*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 13.4)

What’s notable is that Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s failure is not a matter of moral culpability. Instead, it is his own account, as stated in the *Parvan*, that constitutes his confession, marked by startling self-awareness:

*evam etan mahābāho yathā vadasi mādghava |
putra-snehas tu balavān dhairyān mām̐ samacālayat ||*

“It is just so, O you of mighty arms — what you say, O Mādghava, is perfectly true. It is a father’s affection that made me deviate from the path of righteousness.”(*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 6.13)

Through Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s failure, the *Mahābhārata* doesn’t suggest that fatherly affection is the reason for the war, but instead invites us to examine this human emotion. The *Mahābhārata* gently shows that moral failures often stem not from evil intentions but from the distortion of our true virtues, such as love, loyalty, and family ties — especially when these virtues transgress the principles of *dharma*. It subtly states that the risks of letting loose the affection without moral guidance are real, while also reminding us to balance love with righteousness. Matilal’s penetrating analysis of moral dilemmas in the *Mahābhārata* makes the precise point that the *Mahābhārata*’s deepest moral insight lies in its refusal to locate evil in a one villain and its insistence that the problem lies in the catastrophic potential of virtues left unchecked by wisdom (Matilal, 1989).

Broadbeck points out that the two main culprits in the war are “Dhṛtarāṣṭra (for his spineless acquiescence) and Duryodhana (for his aggressive imperialism)” (Broadbeck, 2009, p. 42). The

Strī Parvan shows that these failures are deeply connected, i.e. passive moral cowardice and active moral aggression go hand in hand. When *rājadharmā*—the king’s duty to protect everyone, not just his family—fails, it sets the stage for Duryodhana’s imperialism to take hold. This parvan challenges Dhṛtarāṣṭra to confront this harsh truth in the strongest possible way. The scene where Dhṛtarāṣṭra crushes an iron statue of Bhīma—confusing it, in his grief, for the real Bhīma—is the most powerful moral moment in the *Parvan*. Despite losing everything he cared for in the war, he still harbours violence. The text states:

nāgāyuta-balaprāṇaḥ sa rājā bhīmam āyasam |
bhaṅktvā vimathitoraskaḥ susrāva rudhiraṃ mukhāt ||
tataḥ papāta medinyāṃ tathaiva rudhirokṣitaḥ |
prapuṣpitāgraśikharāḥ pārijāta iva drumāḥ ||

“Possessed of the strength of ten thousand elephants, that king shattered the iron image of Bhīma. His chest being violently crushed, blood flowed from his mouth. Then, covered with blood, he fell upon the earth like a Pārijāta tree with its flowering crest in full bloom.”(*Mbh.*, *Strī Parvan*, 12.18–19)

This image depicts the king as undone by his own violence—a deep wound inflicted by *adharma* in his thoughts. Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s grief is real and heartfelt, but the *Mahābhārata* offers a point of reflection—true grief, arriving too late after choosing pleasure (*preyas*) over ultimate good (*śreyas*), cannot undo the tragic past or lessen the harm done.

3. Gāndhārī’s grief as a reflection of understanding life

Dhṛtarāṣṭra symbolises the failure of a king who prioritises attachment over righteousness, while Gāndhārī embodies something truly special, i.e. someone who steadfastly follows the path of *dharma* despite great personal sacrifice. Her consistent moral conduct compels her to speak the truth. Within the ethical framework of the *Strī Parvan*, she emerges as its most insightful character. Her daily blessing to her sons was—*yato dharmas tato jayah*, meaning “where there is righteousness, there is victory” (*Mbh.*, *Strī Parvan*, 14.9). As the *Parvan* explains, this phrase reflects a fundamental cosmic law, which was sadly proven true in the harshest way. The Pāṇḍavas emerge victorious, and righteousness is upheld, but at a heartbreaking cost—Gāndhārī’s hundred sons are lost. Her blessing comes true, but only after everything that she loves is sacrificed. In the *Strī Parvan*, she is left to reflect on what righteousness demands when it must confront the power of deep-rooted *adharma*—and on her own silent role in enabling that *adharma* to continue.

Gāndhārī possesses divine sight, granting her a clear view of the Kurukṣetra battlefield. Her vision transcends the physical realm, providing moral insight. She witnesses fallen warriors, grieving wives, and the tragic toll of war at once. Confident and deeply grounded in righteousness, yet aware of its potential betrayals, she confronts Kṛṣṇa bravely. Her accusations are among the most morally charged passages in the entire *Parvan*. She does not blame him out of ignorance or malice, but for wilful moral failings — having the power and knowledge to prevent disaster yet choosing not to act:

śaktena bahubhr̥tyena vipule tiṣṭhatā bale |

ubhayatra samarthena śrutavākyena caiva ha ||

“You could have prevented the slaughter, for you possessed a large following and stood supported by a vast army. You possessed persuasive speech and were capable of bringing about peace.” (*Mbh., Strī Parvan, 25.40*)

icchato 'pekṣito nāśaḥ kurūṇāṃ madhusūdana |

yasmāt tvayā mahābāho phalaṃ tasmād avāpnūhi ||

“Since, O Madhusūdana, the destruction of the Kurus was deliberately overlooked by you, therefore, O mighty-armed one, receive the fruit of that act.” (*Mbh., Strī Parvan, 25.41*)

patiśuśrūṣayā yan me tapaḥ kiṃcid upārjitam |

tena tvāṃ duravāpena śapsye cakragadādhara ||

“By whatever little merit I have acquired through devoted service to my husband, by that merit, difficult to attain, I shall curse you, O bearer of the discus and mace.” (*Mbh., Strī Parvan, 25.42*)

yasmāt parasparaṃ ghnanto jñātayaḥ kurupāṇḍavāḥ |

upekṣitās te govinda tasmāj jñātīn vadhiṣyasi ||

“Since the Kurus and the Pāṇḍavas, your kinsmen, slew one another while you remained indifferent, therefore, O Govinda, you too shall become the destroyer of your own kinsmen.” (*Mbh., Strī Parvan, 25.43*)

tvam apy upasthite varṣe śaṭtrimśe madhusūdana |

hatajñātir hatāmātyo hataputro vanecaraḥ ||

anāthavad avijñāto lokaṣv anabhilaṣitaḥ |

kutsitena abhyupāyena nidhanaṃ samavāpsyasi ||

“On the thirty-sixth year from now, O Madhusūdana, after your kinsmen, ministers and sons have perished, you shall wander in the forest. Like one without protection,

unrecognised and as unwanted in the world, you shall meet your end through a contemptible means.” (*Mbh, Strī Parvan*, 25.44-45)

Gāndhārī’s curse on Kṛṣṇa is not just out of grief but a deeper human emotion of a queen. It articulates a principle deeply embedded in the tradition of *Dharmaśāstra*: those who possess the power and knowledge to prevent harm bear moral responsibility when they fail to do so. The *Manusmṛti* states this with unambiguous precision:

*yo na vārayate pāpaṃ samartho vāraṇe sati |
sa tena kilbiṣeṇaiva lipyate nātra saṃśayaḥ ||*

“He who does not prevent sin when he has the power to prevent it is himself tainted by that sin — of this there is no doubt” (*Manusmṛti*, 8.390).

Kane’s account of *Dharmaśāstra* shows that the principle of the morally silent bystander runs throughout the entire tradition of Indian legal and moral thought (Kane, 1941). Gāndhārī isn’t expressing an abstraction of this idea but is applying it to the most influential person she knows— Kṛṣṇa. His response is serene and logically precise. He accepts the curse but raised a question:

*uttiṣṭhottiṣṭha gāndhārī mā ca śoke manah kṛthāḥ |
tavaiva hy aparādhena kuravo nidhanaṃ gatāḥ ||*

“Arise, arise, O Gāndhārī. Do not abandon your mind to grief. Indeed, it is through your own fault that the Kurus have met their destruction.”(*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 26.1)

The exchange between Gāndhārī and Kṛṣṇa in the *Strī Parvan* is an ethically resonant passage in the epic. It puts across the question of moral responsibility with ethical honesty. The actor as Duryodhana, Dhṛtarāṣṭra as an enabler of actions, the silent witness as Gāndhārī, and the one who had already foreseen the disaster but did not fully prevent it, i.e. Kṛṣṇa — each is to be blamed for the wreckage at Kurukṣetra. The *Mahābhārata* does not blame any single person as the villain of the catastrophe. It sees the battle as a web of accumulated choices of many, which justifies the equally distributed accountability for all in the epic. As Matilal (1989) argues, the *Mahābhārata* consistently resists moral oversimplification. It presents tragic outcomes as the product of many interlocking failures rather than putting the blame on a single identifiable source of evil.

What makes Gāndhārī appear different from Dhṛtarāṣṭra is not merely the extent of her grief. In fact, both of them have experienced an unimaginable loss. But it’s her moral strength that gives her distinctive identity. After her fierce glance burns Yudhiṣṭhira’s toenail, she regains

her emotional balance. She warmly embraces the Pāṇḍavas like a mother and shares tears with Draupadī. She also speaks to Bhīma humanely. She neither succumbs to self-pity nor turns to revenge. Instead, she emerges as an example of brave resilience, someone who understands the reality of the situation her own son caused and remains unshaken by its outcomes. In her interpretation of women of the epic in *Yugānta*, Karve describes Gāndhārī as the character in the *Mahābhārata* who most closely embodies *dharma*, even under circumstances that would overwhelm most people (Karve, 1969).

4. The moral resonance amongst the wailing women

The *Strī Parvan* gives voice to many unknown women, wives, mothers and daughters, who walk from Hastināpura to Kurukṣetra, aware of the holocaust caused by the battle. Their lamentation, an emotional outburst, forms the moral spine of the *Parvan*, highlighting the deep sorrow shared by many. Their anonymity is intentional and symbolises that they represent not just one woman's grief but the universal burden of sorrow that every battle or war brings to those who were never asked for their consent. The scale of death recorded in the *Parvan* is extremely harrowing— one billion six hundred sixty million and twenty thousand lives lost; twenty-four thousand, one hundred and sixty-five people managed to escape (*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 26.9–10). These figures go beyond mere military statistics—they are monumental and suggest the uncountable/innumerable/unending. It is the women on the banks of the Gaṅgā who breathe life into this number while humanising it through their tears. Their collective cry reflects the total collapse of *dharma* in the conflict.

*pragrhya bāhūn krośantyaḥ putrān bhrātṛn pitṛn api |
darśayantīva tā ha sma yugānte lokasaṃkṣayam ||*

“Seizing each other's hands, they bewailed their sons, brothers, and fathers — presenting a spectacle as of the destruction at the end of a cosmic cycle.”(*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 10.12)

‘*Yugānte lokasaṃkṣayam*’ in the verse above is a moment marking the end of a cosmic cycle—elevating women's grief from a mere historical event to a crisis in human civilisation. When these women gather around Yudhiṣṭhira at the Gaṅgā, they do not merely cry. They directly challenge him about righteousness, truth and compassion (*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 12.7). They question what sovereignty means to him now in light of the intense massacre on the battlefield (*Mbh., Strī Parvan*, 12.8). These questions are not acts of helplessness but moral challenges. They compel Yudhiṣṭhira to justify his *dharma* not merely as a cosmic duty but in terms of his

responsibility towards the ones whose lives have been lost. His stoic silence within the moral framework of the *Parvan* is the most genuine answer he could offer in the circumstances of *Strī Parvan*, where he is termed victorious but over countless fallen bodies.

5. Kuntī, Draupadī, and their dual loss

Kuntī's confession at the site of river Gaṅgā is a significant speech in the *Strī Parvan*. After decades of maintaining silence about Karṇa's birth throughout the *Mahābhārata*, she finally discloses his identity to her surviving sons after the war. She recognises him as her firstborn and urges them to offer water oblations to their eldest brother, who was born to *Sūrya* before her marriage. This revelation leaves all in astonishment. It transforms an unintentional killing into a conscious act which calls for deep ethical reflection. Yudhiṣṭhira is not pleased with the disclosure of this secret, as it has left them all in greater guilt—the killing of their own eldest brother. His response reflects its seriousness, wherein he declares that:

aho bhavatyā mantrasya gūhena vyaṁ hatāḥ |

nidhanena hi karṇasya pīditāsmu sarvaśaḥ |

“Alas! By your concealment of the secret we have been ruined. For, by the death of Karṇa, we have been afflicted in every way.” (*Mbh.*, *Strī Parvan*, 27.21-22a)

abhimanyor vināśena draupadeya-vadhena ca ||

putrāṇāṁ nidhanaiḥ karṇe patanena ca |

tataḥ śataguṇaṁ duḥkham idaṁ mām asprśad bhṛśam ||

“The destruction of Abhimanyu, the slaughter of the sons of Draupadī, the deaths of my sons, and the fall of Karṇa—because of these, this grief touched me with a hundredfold intensity.” (*Mbh.*, *Strī Parvan*, 27.21b-23)

Kuntī's lamentation in this context is intrinsically linked to silence that's been criminal — she is not only mourning but also standing self-condemned all on account of the *maunavrata* of silence, the consequences of which are now borne irrevocably by her sons. What makes Kuntī's grief different from everyone else's is that her grief and guilt are intertwined.

Draupadī's sorrow in *Strī Parvan* operates on a different moral plane. She has drawn on the epic's full range of protest, including the question—*kiṁ nu pūrvam parājaiṣīr ātmānaṁ mām nu bhārata*—“Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?” (*Mbh. Sabhā Parvan*, 67.7)—that no elder could answer. The *cīraharaṇa* she endured there exemplifies the epic's depiction of the *Sabhā*'s public failure of *dharma* (Hudson, 2013). In *Strī Parvan*, her demeanour is that of a woman who has nothing to ask. Her five sons, the Upapāṇḍavas, were not killed in a direct

battle but in Aśvatthāman's night attack, an event that had already been avenged and narratively concluded before she reached the river. Her grief admits neither reversal nor comfort. There is no confession left to make, and no verdict left to seek.

The suffering of both mother-in-law and daughter-in-law highlights aspects that the *Mahābhārata*'s formal ethics cannot fully capture. Women in the epic often perceive unfairness with sharp clarity and, most of the time, raise their voices without being constrained by their social roles. Kuntī's guilt due to her silence about Karṇa and Draupadī's fatigue from witnessing the violence of hues are like two sides of the same coin of grief. When they meet by the river, their hearts bleed equally as they witness the fruition of the irrational actions of a few men in power. Their joint presence reveals the resilience, inner strength and grand endurance of the women of their emotional, moral and intellectual mantle—the very qualities that are justified within the epic's moral framework, because both have faced impossible events and situations yet have remained undefeated.

Conclusion

The analysis in the article shows that the *Strī Parvan* is not merely a narrative of sorrow and lamentation but a moral reflection that explicates how the *Mahābhārata*'s explores dynamics of *dharma* by shifting from abstract principles to practical consequences. On the one hand, we observe Dhṛtarāṣṭra's acknowledgement that it was his love for his son, rather than ignorance, that led to the downfall of his lineage. This emphasises the epic's key moral lesson that calamities and catastrophes often arise not just from evil tendencies but from virtues such as love, loyalty, and restraint, which, when left unchecked without *viveka* (discriminative wisdom) lead to a category of chaos. It needs to be noted that the *Strī Parvan* does not assign the entire blame for the battle to fatherly affection for Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

Gāndhārī's curse and Kṛṣṇa's acceptance of it expand the sense of responsibility for the war to a wider network of individuals, including both the silent supporters and all those who became active witnesses to the war. This shows that the mass destruction at Kurukṣetra was not caused by one man's blindness but by a collective failure of everyone who knew the consequences of the battle yet voluntarily chose not to act. The blame lies more with the moral blindness of a wide range of individuals in the royal court of Hastināpur.

In fact, Gāndhārī's steadfast courage, which sustained her grief without giving in to self-pity or revenge, serves as the most striking example in the *Strī Parvan* of living in accordance with

dharma despite the destruction of everything she loved, valued and adored. Ultimately, it is the women, whether named or unnamed, who carry the emotional weight of the *Strī Parvan* as they confront the ironies of victory amid the loss that's hard to fully explain.

The mourners along the river Gaṅgā see Yudhiṣṭhira's silence as his most honest response to the tragedy. Kuntī's sincere admission turns her long-term situational silence into a personal grief she alone ought to bear. Draupadī's tired presence, in which her questions remain unanswered, leaves her standing in silence. She simply understands that there's nothing more to ask or to say. Their shared grief not only reflects the tragic toll of war but also reveals a deeper truth about the epic. The *Mahābhārata* does care about the human travails that arise when human minds turn away from *dharma*. It clearly indicates who bears the burden of war, without avoiding the responsibility of presenting the truth for reflection. The epic's honest admission demands our attention because it is a message for posterity. The *Strī Parvan* is more than just a lamentation. It serves as a compelling resource that invites consistent reviews and reflections because its moral lessons resonate even more today than they did in the past. Thus to say—Questions about the consequences of conflict, war, and violence have been perennial since the *Mahābhārata*.

ⁱ All references of *Mahābhārata* are from Dutt, M. N. (2001). *Mahābhārata: Sanskrit text with English translation* (I. C. Sharma & O.N. Bimali, Eds., Vols. 1–2). Parimal Publications.

ⁱⁱ The reference of all the verses is in the format—(*Mbh., Strī Parvan, Chapter. Verses*)

References

- Broadbeck, S. (2009). Husbands of Earth: Kṣatriya females, and female kṣatriyas in the *Strīparvan* of the *Mahābhārata*. In R. P. Goldman & M. Tokunaga (Eds.), *Epic undertakings* (pp. 39–60). Motilal Banarsidass.
- Bühler, G. (Trans.). (1886). *The laws of Manu*. Clarendon Press. <https://archive.org/details/lawsomanu00bh>
- Dutt, M. N. (Trans.). (2001). *Mahābhārata: Sanskrit Text with English Translation* (I. C. Sharma & O. N. Bimali, Eds.; Vol. 6). Parimal.
- Hudson, E. T. (2013). *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata*. Oxford University Press.
- Kane, P. V. (1941). *History of Dharmasāstra* (Vol. 2, Part 1). Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- Karve, I. (1969). *Yugānta: The end of an epoch*. Deshmukh Prakashan. (Reprinted 1991, Orient Longman)
- Matilal, B. K. (Ed.). (1989). *Moral dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study & Motilal Banarsidass.

-
- Sitarama Sastri, S. (1928). *Katha Upanishad with Shankara's commentary*. Motilal Banarsidass. <https://www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/katha-upanishad-shankara-bhashya/d/doc145178.html>