

## Sacred Sounds of Motherhood: An Exploration of Kunti's Portrayal in Mahabharata

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### Abstract

*This study delves into the symbolic significance and narrative role of sacred sounds associated with motherhood, as exemplified through the character of Kunti in the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Through a multidimensional analysis, it explores how Kunti's maternal journey unfolds through the medium of sound, elucidating the deeper layers of her character and the socio-cultural context of her time. Drawing upon textual sources like that of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, 'A Palace of Illusion' and literary analysis this research examines Kunti's use of melodies, lullabies, and hymns as vehicles of maternal love, guidance, and spiritual wisdom. It explores how these sacred sounds serve as conduits for conveying maternal love, transcending mere verbal communication to resonate deeply within the narrative fabric of the Mahabharata. Moreover, this study investigates the profound impact of Kunti's maternal influence on shaping the destiny of her children and the overarching trajectory of the epic saga. It contextualizes Kunti's motherhood within the broader framework of Indian mythology, cultural traditions, and societal norms shedding light on the enduring relevance and resonance of maternal motifs not only within the Mahabharata but also within the collective consciousness of Indian society. By delving into the sacred sounds of motherhood embodied by Kunti; this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the motherhood complexities of maternal identity, agency, and power dynamics within the ancient Indian epic tradition, while also highlighting the timeless significance of maternal narratives in shaping cultural heritage and social values.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Heritage, Motherhood, Kunti, Society

Among the two classic Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the Mahabharata offers a multifaceted web of narratives, characters, and ideas. It delves into the complexities of human nature, dharma (duty), and the intricacies of familial and societal relationships. Amidst the vast array of figures, Kunti emerges as a pivotal character whose nurturing position has an enormous influence on the course of events. Kunti, a Yadava princess, who was originally named Pritha, rises to become King Pandu's queen and the mother of the five Pandavas. A significant portion

of the epic's story revolves around her motherhood which was characterized by peculiar occurrences and divine interventions.

The idea of “motherhood melodies”, and the adoption of music, particularly lullabies and hymns as a tool for comprehending Kunti's motherly persona in the Mahabharata is examined in this research paper. These melodies are more than mere auditory expressions; they represent emotional, spiritual, and cultural aspects that give us a deeper understanding of Kunti's portrayal. By examining these melodic expressions, the paper aims to unfold the layers of her representation and her profound significance on the narrative and her children. “Motherhood Melodies” describes the different ways Kunti interacts with and nurtures her children through sound and melody. This includes melodies that seek divine protection, lullabies that calm and teach, and tunes that express her innermost feelings. Understanding Kunti's nurturing approach in a world of political enticement, familial disputes, and heavenly interventions necessitate comprehension of these musical aspects. Her use of these sounds reflects her deep emotional connection with her children and her desire to impart values and wisdom, thus preparing them for the monumental roles they are destined to play. The present research paper looks at how is portrayed in the Mahabharata also drawing equivalent attention as to how these themes are reworked in The Palace of Illusion by the contemporary writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. A modernized retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's point of view offers fresh insights into the inner lives of the characters including that of Kunti. Kunti's portrayal is given a greater depth in this rendition that digs into the emotional challenges and her nuanced connections with her children. This viewpoint highlights the enduring relevance of Kunti's nuanced maternal role. The sole purpose of this paper is to shed light on the wider ramifications of Kunti's maternal role within the epic. It aims to place Kunti's motherhood within the greater context of Indian mythology and cultural customs demonstrating how her aural manifestation of her motherhood influences the epic narrative alongside the development of its characters. By focusing on Kunti's use of melodies and hymns this study also illustrates Kunti's distinctive maternal impact and the ongoing cultural significance of motherhood. As depicted in the Mahabharata. Through this examination, we may acquire an in-depth understanding of Kunti's multifaceted nature together with the theme of universal themes of maternal love, selflessness, and fortitude in both historical and contemporary settings. The section where Kunti employs hymns, lullabies, and melodies is highlighted throughout the paper. Additionally, a comparative analysis of Divakaruni's retelling highlights both continuities and divergence in the portrayal of Kunti's motherhood.

## Literary Review

Given Kunti's important role in the epic and its influence on its main events, her portrayal in the Mahabharata has been a subject of ongoing scholarly attention. This literature review examines the traditional interpretation of Kunti's character and the idea of motherhood in the Mahabharata as well as how these themes are reinterpreted in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. The Mahabharata being one of the greatest epics in the world literature, has inspired numerous reworkings, adaptations, and reinterpretations across different mediums and cultures. These reworkings provide new perspectives on an ancient story, often highlighting contemporary issues, and paying greater attention to marginalised voices. A few of the notable reworking include:

Alf Hiltebeitel's, *Rethinking the Mahabharata: A Readers Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* discusses Kunti's crucial role in shaping the destinies of the Pandavas. He delves into the didactic elements of the Mahabharata, examining how the text educates its audience, especially the rulers or kings about the complexities of dharma. Similarly, John D Smith in his translation, *The Mahabharata an Abridged Translation* provides insights into Kunti's influence portrays her as a figure of immense moral and spiritual strength. Scholars like Wendy Doniger in, *The Hindu: An Alternative History* discuss how Kunti's invocation of a divine mantra to conceive her sons underscores her significant role in the divine scheme of the epic. This aspect of her character emphasizes her connection to the divine and her role as a protector and guide for her children.

The cultural significance of sounds and music in Vedic tradition is profound, with hymns and chants being integral to spiritual practices. In *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabharata*, Devdutt Pattanaik suggests that the use of lullabies and hymns would have been a natural extension of Kunti's maternal car, reflecting the oral traditions of ancient India. Nonetheless, theatrical, film, and television adaptations are noteworthy. *Mahabharat* (1988-1990), directed by B R Chopra stands as one of the most popular and comprehensive adaptations of Mahabharata. It remains a cultural touchstone for many Indians. This television series devotes substantial screen time to Kunti's character portraying her as a strong, wise, and compassionate figure. Noteworthy are international adaptations as well. *Palace of Illusions* adaptation by Sudha G Tilak from an International perspective provides a fresh interpretation, blending Eastern and Western storytelling traditions. A graphic novel retelling by the title, *Kunti* by Amar Chitra Katha offers a visual retelling of Kunti's life from childhood to her role in the Mahabharata. It highlights her devotion to her sons, her strength in adversity, and her

strategic acumen. The illustrations bring her story to life, making it accessible to younger audiences.

Kunti's character has been a subject of fascination and exploration in various reworkings of The Mahabharata. These adaptations and reinterpretations provide diverse perspectives on her life, highlighting her strengths, challenges, and the profound impact she has on the epic's storyline. Through literary works, theatrical adaptations, television series, and academic studies, Kunti continues to be recognized as a pivotal figure whose story resonates with audiences across generations.

### Methodology and Framework

The research employs a qualitative design primarily focusing on textual analysis. It involves a close reading of both the Mahabharata and Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* to identify and analyze themes related to Kunti's motherhood and the use of auditory elements. The critical edition of the Mahabharata edited by scholars such as Bhandarkar and the translation by John D. Smith will serve as a primary source for the traditional interpretation of Kunti's character whereas *The Palace of Illusions* of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is analyzed to understand the modern reinterpretation of Kunti's character and her maternal role.

### Thematic Framework

The motherly role the Kunti plays is essential to her persona in both the Mahabharata and *The Palace of Illusions*. Her resilience courage and intense love for her children mark the qualities of her motherhood. Kunti's maternal influence may be seen throughout the Mahabharata in her choices and deeds which leaves a great impact on Pandavas's life. For instance, her decision to keep Karna's birth a secret during their exile highlights her protective and astute thinking throughout their banishment. Although Kunti's use of melodies is not mentioned in the canonical texts, it is clear from the cultural context that Kunti's maternal expressions were influenced by these auditory aspects.

On the other hand, Divakaruni delves deeper into Kunti's emotional and psychological issues in her novel *The Palace of Illusions*. The novel deals with the epitome of human emotions concerning guilt, sorrow, and a strong sense of duty. Divakaruni strongly emphasizes Kunti's innermost turmoil and her efforts to balance her desire alongside her responsibilities as a mother. She depicts Kunti's melodies as manifestations of Kunti's love and concern that establishes a stronger bond between her children as a means to communicate with her children, providing them with comfort and strength.

## Analytical Framework

The analytical framework for this research integrates feminist literary criticism and cultural studies to examine the representation of Kunti's portrayal in Mahabharata and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. This approach allows a comprehensive understanding of Kunti's portrayal, emphasizing both the cultural significance and gender dynamics of her maternal role. Kunti operates within a predominantly patriarchal society where male authority and lineage are paramount despite these constraints, Kunti exhibits considerable agency and influence particularly in her maternal role. For instance, her decision to reveal Karna's identity at a critical moment reflects both her adherence to maternal duty and her strategic thinking within a male-dominated narrative.

## Cultural Context

Kunti represents a multifaceted character shaped by cultural contexts of ancient Indian and contemporary reinterpretations. Kunti's character analysis through the lens of cultural studies examines how cultural norms, religious practices, and societal expectations influence her character in both texts.

The Mahabharata is deeply rooted in the cultural and religious traditions of ancient India, particularly those of the Vedic period, thereby her character is shaped by these traditions and the societal norms of her time where women were confined to domestic roles, with their primary responsibilities revolving around household management and child-rearing, thus Kunti's role as a mother and queen reflects these societal expectations. The Palace of Illusions reinterprets Kunti's character through a modern lens, incorporating contemporary cultural values and feminist perspectives. The novel thereby paints Kunti as a figure who challenges traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms.

## Comparative analysis of Kunti in *The Mahabharata* and *The Palace of Illusions*

Indubitably, Kunti the mother of the Pandavas is a central figure in the epic Mahabharata and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*. While Kunti is portrayed in the Mahabharata within the confines of the conventional epic framework, Divakaruni's retelling offers contemporary viewpoints and provides a nuanced emotional and psychological depth. This comparative analysis explores the continuities and divergence in Kunti's representation in the two texts drawing particular attention to her melodies and hymns, emotional resilience, and her role as a mother.

## Traditional portrayal in The Mahabharata

In the canonical text Mahabharata, Kunti is portrayed as a formidable, astute, and cunning mother whose deeds enormously affect the epic's narrative. Her dedication to her sons depicts her maternal role, her unwavering support, and her strategic guidance are portrayed as selfish. The Mahabharata primarily focuses on the epic's grand narrative and her external actions. Her inner emotional world and psychological struggles are less emphasized. However, her agony over Karna and her sorrow at the hardship faced by her son hint at her nuanced emotional depth. Key aspects of her portrayal include:

- Kunti's strategic and protective impulses are immediately apparent when she secures divine boons to conceive her sons. Her strategic mind demonstrates her strategic thinking during her son's exile and amidst the Kurukshetra War.
- Kunti frequently serves as her son's emotional and moral compass. Her profound connection to dharma(righteousness) is reflected in the spiritual knowledge with which she imparts wisdom. For instance, her guidance to Yudhishtira on patience and righteousness underlines her role as a moral guide.
- Although Kunti's usage of hymns and lullabies are not mentioned in the Mahabharata specifically, these can be inferred from the cultural context of the time. Vedic tradition often integrated such practices into daily life.

## Modern Reinterpretation in *The Palace of Illusions*

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni offers a modern reinterpretation of Kunti, providing a more intimate and emotionally nuanced portrayal. The novel delves into Kunti's inner life, elaborating on her emotional struggles, guilt, and resilience. Key aspects of her portrayal include:

- Divakaruni highlights Kunti's internal turmoil and disgrace, particularly regarding her relation to Karna. The novel portrays Kunti's decision to abandon Karna as a source of lifelong regret and sorrow, adding additional depth to her character.
- The novel highlights Kunti's profound love for her children and the sacrifices she makes for their well-being. Her use of melodies and hymns is portrayed as a means of providing comfort and instilling strength in her sons, reflecting the cultural significance of these practices in a deeply personal manner.



- Kunti's emotional resilience is a key theme in the novel. Despite her inner turmoil at the sight of Karna, her firstborn she stays strong and composed, providing unwavering support to her children by sticking to tradition.

### Comparative Insights

#### Continuities:

- In both texts, Kunti's maternal influence is evident. Her choices and guidance shape the destinies of her sons, reflecting her pivotal role in the narratives.
- The two main facets of Kunti in both seminal texts are her strength and resilience. Despite the challenges that life throws at her she remains the pillar of strength for her children by protecting and guiding them throughout.
- A culturally significant aspect of Kunti's maternal role in both books is the use of hymns and lullabies, although this is covered in great length in *The Palace of Illusions*.

#### Divergences:

- Kunti's emotional and psychological aspects are explored in great detail in Divakaruni's book. Although the Mahabharata makes references to her internal conflicts, it focuses more on her external actions and strategic role.
- Kunti's character is viewed from a contemporary feminist point of view in *The Palace of Illusions*, emphasizing her emotional resilience and the complexities of her maternal role.
- *The Palace of Illusions'* more intimate and individualized storyline stands in stark contrast to the epic narrative framework of the Mahabharata. Because of the shift in the narrative's emphasis, Divakaruni can get deeper into Kunti's persona and emphasize facets of her that aren't clear in the classic epic.

The comparative analysis of Kunti's portrayal in *The Mahabharata* and *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni reveals both continuities and divergences in her character. While the traditional epic emphasizes her strategic importance and moral guidance; the contemporary retelling offers a more intimate and emotionally nuanced picture.

### Scope for Future Research

Further research on the representation of Kunti has a plethora of intriguing avenues. Scholars can continue to unearth new facets of Kunti's personality by broadening feminist ideas, comparing cultures, doing psychological assessments, and using interdisciplinary methods. Further insights into the ongoing significance of Kunti's maternal role and its relevance in contemporary literary and cultural debate can also be gained by examining the effects of contemporary retellings and audio-visual adaptations. The continuous investigation will enhance comprehension of one of the most intricate and captivating mother characters in epic literature.

## Conclusion

An intricate tapestry of maternal strength, emotional depth, and cultural relevance is revealed when Kunti's portrayal in the Mahabharata and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion* is examined through the perspectives of motherhood melodies. In the Mahabharata, Kunti is shown as a shrewd mother whose wisdom and influence play a pivotal role in determining the fate of her sons, the Pandavas. Her maternal role is implied by the Vedic cultural setting where such acts were integral to nurturing and spiritual guidance, even though it is not often expressly stated in terms of melodies and hymns. Kunti's character gains layers of emotional and psychological complexity in Divakaruni's retelling of *The Palace of Illusions*, providing a nuanced portrait that appeals to current audiences. The book beautifully captures Kunti's use of hymns and melodies to portray her intense love, grief, and resilience offering a close look into her personal life and her challenges as a mother. This reinterpretation highlights the timeless relevance of Kunti's character, bridging the ancient epic's cultural heritage with modern literary sensibilities.

By employing feminist literary criticism and cultural studies, this analysis highlights the ways Kunti's representation in two texts underscored the continuities and divergences. While the contemporary story narrative stresses her emotional resilience and emotional depth, the classical texts emphasize her strategic importance. This dual perspective enriches our understanding of Kunti as a mother, showcasing her enduring influence and the profound impact of her maternal role.

Furthermore, Kunti's representation in *The Palace of Illusions* and the Mahabharata illustrates the intricacies of motherhood by fusing themes of bravery, sacrifice, and emotional fortitude. Her persona is an actual illustration of the strength of parental love and the significant role of cultural practices such as melodies and hymns, in nurturing and shaping future





generations. This exploration highlights the crucial role that mother plays in both ancient and contemporary narratives encouraging further research into the intricate aspects of maternal figures in literature.

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