



Empowered Journeys: Exploring Gender Dynamics in *Roll of the Dice* and *Rise of Kali*

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Abstract: Through the characters of Kunti and Draupadi in *Roll of the Dice*, and in *Rise of Kali*, Neelakantan explores the complexities of gender dynamics and power structures inside a patriarchal society. The character Kunti is depicted as a deceitful person who pushes her social boundaries by justifying questionable actions for her sons' advancement, particularly by abandoning the Nishada family to satisfy *dharma*. Her contacts show the strict male-dominated standards that restrict women's agency, highlighting that her plea for authority hinges on male acceptance. In contrast, Draupadi embodies a shift from victimhood to empowerment, calling for retribution for her degradation and triggering her political actor role. Rooted in the caste hierarchy, her refusal of Karna challenges established power relations and shows her assertion of agency to which women generally yield. Draupadi's public cry for revenge highlights her rejection of patriarchal domination, turning embarrassment into a political power. As Kunti and Gandhari compete for power through their sons, their interaction emphasizes the competitive relationships between women in a patriarchal context. In general, both figures illustrate the intersection of caste and gender and thereby shed light on the more general themes of oppression and the search for autonomy. Neelakantan offers a sensitive observation of women's tireless search of identity and justice within inflexible social structures through their stories, calling for thought on current gender and power issues.

Keywords: Power, gender, Caste, retribution, politics.

Introduction

Few great works have captivated people quite as much as the Mahabharata within the field of literature. Readers everywhere still connect with this sophisticated narrative structure and rich tapestry of characters in this old Indian epic. Anand Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice* and *Rise of Kali*, from *Ajaya* series, offer a modern re-reading of this long story. The gender, caste, and portrayal of women in this fascinating book are the subject of this article. We hope to highlight by considering the relationships among politics, power, and identity how Neelakantan contemporary story challenges popular perceptions yet stays faithful to the core of the Mahabharata. Neelakantan's work stands out as it offers fresh perspectives on well-known figures, allowing for a deeper understanding of their struggles and agency in a constrained society. The exploration of nuanced female characters reveals the complexities of their relationships with power and identity, highlighting the resilience and strength of women in overcoming societal limitations. Through this analysis, we aim to unravel the intricate layers within these characters' journeys, reflecting on broader themes of oppression and liberation that remain relevant in the contemporary discourse on gender and social justice. As we examine into the lives of Kunti and Draupadi, we uncover how their choices and defiance not only shape their destinies but also challenge the very foundations of a patriarchal society. Anand Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice* and *Rise of Kali* serve as a compelling modern re-reading of the Mahabharata, where the interplay of gender, caste, and the portrayal of women reveals a nuanced understanding of empowerment that both challenges traditional interpretations and remains rooted in the epic's core narrative; through an analysis of power dynamics and identity, this article argues that Neelakantan's works not only reinterpret longstanding societal constructs but

also advocate for a reimagined role of women in ancient texts, thereby offering critical insights into contemporary discourse on gender and social hierarchies.

Literature Review

Gayathri's essay investigates how Kavita Kané's depiction of Uruvi in *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* (2024) represents a major departure from conventional epic stories. Gayathri says Kané portrays Uruvi in a way that transcends the typically passive or objectified roles of other female characters like Draupadi and Kunti, who are only shown as trophies in royal contests and swayamvaras. Gayathri argues, by contrast, that Kané depicts Uruvi as a "brave woman who helps Karna achieve success" (53), precisely selecting him as her mentor and stressing her feminist independence in her choices. As Gayathri says, Uruvi's behavior reflects the principles of feminist philosophy, especially in terms of women's emancipation, as she challenges "wrong societal norms" and convinces her father of her legitimate choice (53). Ultimately, Gayathri determines that Uruvi is an "independent woman" who seeks to exercise her freedom in Pukya rather than rely on the male-centered protection provided by the Hastinapur throne when Karna died. Her path, defined by personal conflicts, leads to a great declaration of "the existence of an individual as a woman," therefore destroying patriarchal standards and setting a new standard for women's representation in epic literature (54).

Devi Viswaraj (2024) explores the feminist reinterpretations of the Mahabharata found in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Kavita Kané's *Karna's Wife* in her article, "Retelling of Myth through Feminine Lens: An Analysis of Retelling of Mahabharata in *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *Karna's Wife* by Kavita Kané," claiming that these versions transform the female characters' context, giving them both agency and a new perspective. Viswaraj argues that these pieces of art challenge established gender roles and caste hierarchies, offering sophisticated representations that empower women and deal with modern social complexity while maintaining the moral basis of the parent story. Observing that "every force in society conspires to strip her of subjectivity and reduce her to an object," Viswaraj especially emphasizes the resilience and bravery shown by Draupadi and Uruvi. Both of them are learned, smart, and gifted people. Their hardships and obstacles are obvious throughout several parts of the story; however, along with their companions, they show exceptional strength and bravery. Though their narrative neglected them because of their gender, they have all the qualities that could define them as outstanding individuals. Viswaraj argues that the authors reveal the hardships and resolve of these women by sharing stories, therefore deepening general knowledge of gender and caste issues found in the epic.

S Abhirami and Smritisikta Mishra (2023) in the article called "(Re)Visiting the Traumatized Indian Matriarch Through Contemporary Retellings: A Psycho-Cultural Exploration" investigate the roles of female characters. Because it offers a fresh view of Satyawati, a major character in the Mahabharata, the novel "The Fisher Queen's Dynasty" by Kavita Kané serves as the main point of analysis by the authors. Traumatic events Satyawati went through in her youth, especially her father's abandonment, have been said to have had great impact on her personality and choices when she was queen of Hastinapur. The modern reinterpretation of Satyawati's story is part of a larger criticism of the challenges women encounter inside patriarchal systems. The complexity of female desire and the influence of past traumas on current identities are both considered in this analysis of how these stories may help to clarify. It is argued that women's search for power is hindered by cultural norms, trauma, and the suppression of aspirations enforced by patriarchy, which then has wide-ranging consequences for gender equality and society representation.

S. Ponnarasi and K Sindhu (2024) examine in her work "Voice and Agency: Subversive Feminist Narratives in Select Contemporary Indian Retellings" how modern Indian writers reimagine female characters from mythology to question conventional patriarchal narratives. In the writings of Volga and Amish Tripathi, they particularly study how Sita changes from a passive subject into an empowered protagonist. Ponnarasi and Sindhu hold that these writers present Sita in ways very different from her usual portrayal, thereby challenging long-established cultural ideas of womanhood. Therefore creating "a new identity for Sita that stresses self-realization and female solidarity over traditional ideas on wifely devotion and suffering," Volga's portrayal of Sita especially reflects "acts of intellectual engagement, emotional autonomy, and ultimately self-liberation," according to them. (19-20). This study shows how the authors use Sita's character to question and redefine the patriarchal narratives that have traditionally shaped her role in Indian mythology.

Soumi Gayen (2022) analyzes in an article titled "The Epical Subalterns Speak: Revisiting the Mahabharata through Manohar Mouli Biswas's *Ghatotkach* and *Hidimba: A Dialogue*," how the works of Manohar Mouli Biswas give subaltern characters inside the Mahabharata a stage to confront and question patriarchal authority. By highlighting the stories of oppressed people such as Ghatotkach and Hidimba, whose experiences have often been missed, Gayen stresses the need of awareness and appreciation. She contends that this reassessment motivates modern academics and authors to highlight historically silenced or misunderstood voices. Gayen argues that looking at how these subaltern numbers restore their identities and assert their rights affects social

movements very profoundly. She especially emphasizes that marginal groups need to express their experiences and needs, which in turn promotes empowerment and agency within the larger social conversation.

In "*Genealogy of Discrimination and Critique of Caste in Select Indian Literary Representations*," Mholkar (2024) provides a deeper understanding of caste discrimination by examining its portrayal within literary and cultural contexts. Mholkar argues that caste-based injustices must be seen as a social construction rather than an inherent part of society. He claims, "By studying caste-based discrimination from past times to present society, we conclude that this inequality is not a natural event, instead it has been artificially established and is systematically maintained by meta-narratives, hegemonic discourse, dominant ideologies, and the cultural base and superstructure of Indian society" (76). This investigation underlines the widespread character of caste discrimination and its deep embedding inside the ideological and cultural structures of Indian society.

Gender and Power Dynamics

One of the primary themes explored in both "Roll of the Dice" and "Rise of Kali" is the intense and often tumultuous struggle for power among individuals of the same gender. Neelakantan masterfully presents the female characters within these narratives as complex and multifaceted individuals, each wrestling with their own distinct set of challenges, personal desires, and aspirations. In particular, Neelakantan's nuanced portrayal of Kunti, the revered mother of the Pandavas, invites readers to reassess and question traditional notions of motherhood and what it means to be a maternal figure. Through her intricate and sometimes fraught relationships with her sons, as well as her significant impact on shaping their destinies, the author emphasizes the complexities inherent in maternal affection. He also sheds light on the sacrifices that women often find themselves making within the confines of societal expectations and norms. The character of Gandhari is similarly significant, as her portrayal evokes a deep sense of longing for power for the sake of her children, highlighting the dimensions of maternal ambition. Moreover, Draupadi emerges as a powerful figure who boldly challenges male dominance, taking a stand to reclaim her dignity and seek vengeance for the wrongs she has suffered. In her quest for justice and recognition, she ultimately strives to attain power on her own terms.

Neelakantan, through Suyodhana's perspective, elucidates power dynamics through a striking incident concerning a discourse on the presence of women within the assembly. "It all commenced with his aunt Kunti beseeching Bhishma to allow her attendance at the Sabha. When the Grand Regent articulated his verdict, Dhaumya retorted with ire that it was without precedent for women to be in attendance at the Sabha. The conservative Brahmin invoked various smritis regarding the prohibition of widows from being seen in public, much less in positions of authority (25). Kunti's entreaty to participate in the Sabha is framed as a revolutionary departure from entrenched conventions. This promptly underscores the exclusion of women from public and political domains. In a patriarchal culture, the Sabha (court) is explicitly a male province. The necessity for Bhishma's "permission" to grant her request emphasises her lack of intrinsic agency. She relies on male power for access to what ought to be a communal space. Dhaumya's vehement response and reference to "smritis" reveal the rigid, tradition-laden nature of the patriarchy. These ancient texts serve to rationalise the exclusion and subjugation of women. The explicit mention of widows being barred from public visibility and authority is particularly revealing. It exposes the precariousness of women devoid of male protection and the apprehension that granting them power could disrupt the established hierarchy. The employment of the term "unprecedented" conveys that it is not a matter of women lacking the capability to be in the court but rather that the patriarchal framework had hitherto prohibited it. Bhishma's function as the "Grand Regent" and Dhaumya's position as an "orthodox Brahmin" illustrate the interconnected political and spiritual authority systems that uphold patriarchal dominance. Kunti's appeal can be regarded as analogous to women advocating for equitable representation in traditionally male-dominated realms. Dhaumya's response resonates with the resistance women frequently encounter when contesting the status quo, with assertions regarding "tradition" or "meritocracy" being employed to obscure underlying prejudices. The utilisation of religious texts to rationalise gender discrimination is a recurring motif in numerous societies. Current instances encompass disputes regarding women's roles in religious establishments, access to reproductive health services, and interpreting religious laws.

Kunti transcends the boundaries of dharma when she opts to trap the Nishada woman and her five sons for their escape from the palace of lac. Kunti rationalises her act of ensnaring the Nishada woman and her five offspring within the Lac palace by stating, "You are serving a a great cause. You and your five sons are serving *dharma*" (299). This exposes Kunti's manipulative disposition. She wields the idea of "*dharma*" to rationalise her atrocious act, underscoring her readiness to distort moral principles to fulfil her objectives. It further illustrates her callous disregard for the lives of the Nishada family. She frames their imminent demise as a noble sacrifice, effectively dehumanising them. Kunti's endeavour to justify her actions by asserting they

are "serving dharma" exemplifies moral rationalisation. She distorts the concept of dharma to align with her agenda.

Nevertheless, she struggles to persuade Arjuna regarding the atrocious nature of extinguishing these lives. Even though Yudhishtira attempted to reason with Arjuna, it proved futile. Kunti tells him,

"I always thought Vidhura was against us, but this shows we cannot fathom God's deep and mysterious ways. It is His will that this mother and her five sons arrived to act as decoys for our 'death. Besides remember your Gurus teaching you about *Apat dharma*. Nothing is considered wrong if it is in self preservation. Who are we to question his will" (301).

This illustrates Kunti's capacity to evade responsibility. By attributing the Nishada family's fate to "God's will," she absolves herself of culpability. This reveals a degree of cold calculation, showing she is prepared to utilise any means to an end. It demonstrates her ability to reinterpret events to fit her narrative and evade accountability. She employs "*Apat dharma*" (dharma in distress) as a convenient justification for murder, highlighting her willingness to prioritise self-preservation over all else, even at the expense of innocent lives. Again, the phrase "Who are we to question His will?" serves to deflect moral scrutiny and validate her actions. The fact that the victims belong to a Nishada family is significant, even if not explicitly articulated. It unveils Kunti's exploitation of the caste hierarchy. She selects victims from a marginalised group, reflecting her willingness to leverage their vulnerability for her benefit. This is a stark representation of caste discrimination. Kunti's actions reveal the lengths to which women in positions of limited power might go to secure their and their children's futures within a patriarchal system. Although she lacks formal political authority, she exerts influence through her sons, employing cunning and manipulation to achieve her goals. The selection of a Nishada woman and her sons is pivotal. Nishadas were a tribal community frequently regarded as outside the conventional varna system and subjected to discrimination. Kunti capitalises on their marginalised status, perceiving them as disposable. This act emphasises the intersection of gender and caste oppression. The Nishada woman is doubly vulnerable, being both a woman and a member of a lower-caste group.

Kunti is a shrewd politician, adept at manoeuvring each individual to attain her objectives and provide others with a splendid future. Her directive to share Draupadi with her other brothers represents a strategic move to secure the throne by overcoming Duryodhana. She addresses Krishna, saying;

Explain to Arjuna what karma and dharma are. Why is he angry? Does he not know that they must stand together to defeat Duryodhana? I do not wish them to fight over this girl. She should be proud that each of my five incomparable sons will share her. I too, have done the same in my time, as did my husband's second wife, Madri. That is how all five of them were born (331).

Kunti's remarks to Krishna, seemingly intended to pacify Arjuna's frustration regarding Draupadi's polyandrous union, expose a starkly pragmatic and manipulative approach to authority. It is not centred on compassion or understanding but on solidifying the Pandavas' political alliance to vanquish Duryodhana. Kunti prioritises the unity of the Pandavas and their collective goal of defeating Duryodhana over any consideration for Draupadi's emotional or psychological welfare. She attempts to trivialise Arjuna's legitimate ire by invoking "karma and dharma," effectively employing religious and philosophical notions to rationalise a morally questionable scenario. This exemplifies the use of ideology as a device for political opportunism. She reduces Draupadi to a mere political instrument, a means to an end. The term "this woman" is dismissive and dehumanising. Her claim that Draupadi "should be proud" constitutes a grotesque effort to normalise and even exalt her compelled polyandry. It reveals a total absence of empathy and a readiness to compromise another woman's dignity for political advantage. This further emphasises how Kunti has absorbed the patriarchal perspective of women as objects to be utilised. Kunti strives to align her own experiences with divine intervention (invoking deities to bear sons) and Madri's circumstances (a specific wish from her husband) with Draupadi's coerced polyandry. This indicates a thorough disregard for the context and autonomy of the women involved. She leverages her past experiences to rationalise Draupadi's predicament, effectively silencing any opposition. Kunti's foremost concern is to preserve the Pandavas' cohesion and ensure their triumph over Duryodhana. Draupadi's emotions and dignity are secondary, if not entirely inconsequential. Kunti's actions reveal a clear comprehension of power dynamics. She recognises that Draupadi's polyandry is vital for the Pandavas' coalition and, thus, her political leverage. She is prepared to sacrifice another woman's self-worth to secure her sons' power. Kunti's arguments are not driven by emotion; they are calculated. She utilises her own experience and religious principles to attempt to manipulate the situation. She employs her influence as the mother of the Pandavas to shape the narrative. Kunti's statement uncovers a woman who is willing to manipulate, rationalise, and disregard another woman's dignity to realise her political ambitions. It is a stark reminder of how power can corrupt and how even those who profess to act for a higher cause can commit profoundly unjust acts.

Simultaneously, the encounter between Gandhari and Kunti also unveils the division between the two women regarding authority. During Duryodhana's nuptials with Bhanumati, Kunti and Gandhari engaged in a dialogue that escalated into a dispute over the kingdom's succession. Referring to Duryodhana as "Crown Prince," Gandhari reaffirmed his entitlement to the throne following his father's reign. Concluding the intense exchange, Kunti remarked, "We shall see who sits on the throne of Hastinapura finally, Gandhari. We are no pushovers" (369). In response, Gandhari asserted, "We will see, Kunti. Since Suyodhana is my legitimate son, he will rule this country" (369). These interactions between Kunti and Gandhari are fraught with political strain, exposing the profound rivalry between the two mothers, each competing for the future of their sons and, consequently, their authority. Kunti's statement represents a direct provocation, a proclamation of her resolve to secure the throne for her sons. She refuses to be dismissed or underestimated, indicating her readiness to contend for her sons' claims. This notably aggressive stance demonstrates Kunti's willingness to confront Gandhari. Gandhari's rejoinder is equally resolute; however, she anchors her argument on the perceived legitimacy of Suyodhana's birth. The term "legitimate" carries substantial connotations, suggesting that the births of the Pandavas, especially given their divine progenitors, are in some way less valid. This assertion directly rebuts Kunti's claim, illustrating that Gandhari remains steadfast. By emphasising Suyodhana's legitimacy, Gandhari indirectly challenges Kunti by questioning the validity of the Pandavas' births. Gandhari's focus on "legitimate" birth casts doubt upon the Pandavas' divine origins, insinuating they are somehow less deserving of the throne. This serves as a subtle but impactful means of undermining their claim. While Kunti does not retaliate in the same manner as Gandhari, her aggressive disposition suggests she is prepared to pursue any means necessary to prevail. This insinuation can be viewed as disparaging, as it implies her readiness to engage in actions that may be deemed improper. The interaction underscores the confrontation between two formidable women navigating a patriarchal framework. Although they lack formal political power, they exert influence through their sons and maternal roles. This episode illuminates a struggle for dominance between two women utilising their most potent instruments: their words and their influence. They are contending for their sons' futures and their legacies in a realm where authority is frequently dictated by birth and lineage.

Gandhari was acutely aware of Kunti's aspirations for the future. She would employ any means necessary to incite the populace against the Kauravas. In the second volume, *Rise of Kali*, Neelakantan conveys Gandhari's reflections: Kunti endeavoured to sway public sentiment against Duryodhana by adopting the role of a martyr. In the eyes of the community, Kunti had transformed into a powerless widow victimised by the malevolent Duryodhana. "Kunti was now a helpless widow, who had been thrown into the streets by the evil Duryodhana" (79). Kunti adeptly navigates the societal archetype of the vulnerable widow, eliciting sympathy and compassion from the masses, thereby portraying herself as a casualty of Duryodhana's cruelty. Kunti recognises the significance of public perception. She understands that should the populace regard Duryodhana as a villain, they will consequently view the Pandavas as aggrieved. This strategy is employed to garner public backing for the Pandavas. She deftly manipulates emotions, controls the narrative, and adopts a tactical stance of victimhood to turn public sentiment against Duryodhana and further her political ambitions.

Neelakantan in *Roll of the Dice*, delineates Draupadi within the framework of Swayamvara. She seemingly favours the high caste over a commendable individual. At the moment of Karna's triumph, upon witnessing his success in the challenge, Draupadi proclaims, "I will not marry a Suta." This soft whisper came from Draupadi. It sounded like a thunderclap in the silent and expectant hall" (322). This gesture transcends mere individual rejection; it embodies a societal and political assertion that fortifies the caste hierarchy. This public degradation illustrates the upper castes' dominance over the lower castes. While Draupadi is frequently depicted as a mere instrument in the political manoeuvres of the men surrounding her, this instant highlights her autonomy. She uses her voice to disrupt the anticipated paradigm and assert her agency. Her decision to articulate, even in a "soft whisper," illustrates her cognisance of the potency of her words. She comprehends that her repudiation will yield substantial ramifications. Her whisper's "thunderclap" effect signifies the astonishment and indignation that her utterance incites. She is contravening the expectations of the gathered monarchs and warriors, who presumably presumed she would acquiesce to the victor of the Swayamvara irrespective of caste. This act constitutes a challenge to the established power dynamics. Draupadi's assertion carries far-reaching political implications. It intensifies the animosity between Karna and the Pandavas, contributing to the escalation of strife in the Kurukshetra war. This illustrates that even a personal decision can engender profound political consequences. Draupadi's declaration is a formidable denunciation of the caste system and its perpetuation of social inequity. It also exposes the intricate power dynamics at play, wherein even a woman within a patriarchal framework can exert considerable influence through her discourse. This moment represents a pivotal junction in the narrative, underscoring the deleterious effects of prejudice and the persistent quest for social justice. Moreover, Karna recognised that "Nothing, but caste matters here"

(323). Karna's pronouncement is a poignant and potent condemnation of the caste system. It reflects a statement of disheartened acceptance, acknowledging the system's intrinsic injustice, and serves as a testament to the enduring authority of social hierarchy. He remains a victim of a societal order beyond his control.

Draupadi in "*Rise of Kali*" represents a instinctive and potent manifestation of her yearning for retribution, signifying her metamorphosis from an object of indignity to an instrument of vengeance. "Bhima, I wait the day you will bring me Dushasana's blood. I will drink it with relish" (80). Following an act of public humiliation and an attempted violation in the Kaurava court, Draupadi's utterances denote a restitution of her agency. She declines to remain inert and instead vigorously insists on retribution. Her proclamation illustrates that she is no longer a mere victim but a formidable force. Draupadi's directive to Bhima alters the power relations. She transitions from being the subject of masculine domination to being the one orchestrating action. In a societal context where honour and reputation were of utmost significance, Draupadi's public degradation was a catastrophic affront. Her call for vengeance seeks to reinstate her honour and reclaim her dignity. She strives to redress the imbalance of power. By demanding such a brutal act, Draupadi confronts the patriarchal conventions that aim to silence and subjugate her. She refuses to adhere to the expectations of feminine submissiveness. She shatters the archetype of what a woman should embody. Her quest for retribution emerges as a catalyst for the Kurukshetra war, underscoring her position as a pivotal political figure. Her actions serve as a motivating force throughout the narrative.

Draupadi's vehement reproach of Yudhishtira in "*Rise of Kali*," "Why look back now? you gambled and lost everything. . . never forget Yudhishtira, my humiliation, never forget my shame, now or ever," (80) powerfully exemplifies a woman's rise to power through the deliberate utilisation of shame and memory. In Draupadi's instance, she weaponises her public humiliation, transmuting it from a source of personal defilement into a formidable tool of political influence. By compelling Yudhishtira to carry the burden of her shame perpetually, she effectively takes command, ensuring her trauma evolves into the impetus behind their actions, thereby establishing herself as a formidable, albeit vengeful, political actor.

Conclusion

"*Roll of the Dice*" and "*Rise of Kali*" adeptly examine the gender dynamics and power structures inherent in society, illustrating the complexities faced by female characters, particularly Kunti and Draupadi. Neelakantan portrays Kunti as a figure who manipulates her circumstances within patriarchal confines, often employing moral rationalisations to achieve her ends, including the tragic fate of the Nishada family. Through her strategic dialogues, Kunti embodies the fierce maternal instinct and ambition that drive her to manoeuvre for her sons' power, even at the expense of other women's dignity. Conversely, Draupadi emerges as a powerful agent of retribution, actively reclaiming her agency following her public humiliation. Her demand for vengeance transforms her from a passive victim into a central political figure, shaping the narrative's course. Both characters illustrate the intersectionality of gender and caste, reflecting broader societal issues of power, oppression, and the struggle for agency within rigid hierarchical frameworks. The text profoundly explores how women navigate and challenge these structures in their quest for identity and justice.

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