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## **A Critical Reading of Yuganta: The End of an Epoch**

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### **Abstract**

*Yuganta* focuses on the principal heroic characters of *The Mahabharata* from historical and anthropological viewpoints. Every character depicts the end of an epoch-the yuga. Bhishma's life is tied to a vow while he was free to die at his will and become a Vasu again. Gandhari's love for children blinded her social responsibility towards Pandavas. Kunti's life was filled with austerity from the beginning to the end from which she had no escape. Draupadi's life revolved around the victory of the war which ends in futility. Karna is overcome by fate and Ashvattama fails the test of the Smriti. Yet, all the characters have one focal point- 'to live with honour and to die with honour'.

**Keywords : yuga, epoch, smriti**

## A Critical Reading of Yuganta: The End of an Epoch

Irawati Karve (1950-1970) was born in Burma and educated in Pune and Berlin . She was the Professor of Anthropology at Deccan College, Pune . Her famous works include *Hindu Society: An Interpretation* and *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*. *Yuganta* was translated from Marathi into English by Karve in 1967 and subsequently it won the Sahitya Akademi prize as the best book in Marathi during the particular year. Karve expressed her feelings thus, “I read *The Mahabharata* because I like it (2) . . . . There are various ways of making it yield its riches. No one can encompass it entirely (3) .She applies the knowledge of anthropology, literary theories and her personal approach to study one of the greatest epics of India.

*The Mahabharata* is written in Sanskrit portraying the family feud which ends in a fierce battle. The events are real, the story dates back to the time period of 1000 B.C. in Hastinapura. The text has eighteen divisions and each division is known as ‘parva’ or ‘parvan’. The number of couplets vary from one another. The parva with the number of couplets are as follows:

1	Adiparva	7,982
2	Sabhaparva	2,511
3	Vana / Aranyaparvam	11,664
4	Virataparva	2,500
5	Udyogaparva	6,698
6	Bhishmaparva	5,864
7	Dronaparva	8,909
8	Karnaparva	4,900
9	Shalayparva	3,200
10	Sauptikaparva	870
11	Striparva	775
12	Shantiparva	14,525
13	Anushasanaparva	6,700
14	Ashvamedhikaparva	3,320
15	Ashramavasikaparva	1,506
16	Mausalaparva	300
17	Mahaprasthanikaparva	120
18	Svargarohanaparva	200

According to Karve, “all human effort is fruitless, all human life ends in frustration ... Human toil, expectations, hates, friendships, - all seem [small] and without substance , like withered leaves eddying in the summer wind”(10). And also, the agony of the characters represents the agony of the entire world. Bhishma's life is filled with contradiction , and he was a man of logic in his actions and thought. He was born a cursed being and he was forced to live for a particular time on earth. The eight Vasus who were cursed by Vashishta spoke to Goddess Ganga thus, “Let us be born of your womb. Kill us the moment we are born and release us from the world of mortals” (14).

Goddess Ganga acted according to the request of the Vasus. She decides to marry Shantanu on the condition that the latter would neither prevent nor blame her for what she does. She warned, “The day you do that, I would leave you” (*Yuganta* 16). Ganga drowned every child once it is born , but as she was about to drown the eighth one, Shantanu interrupted and she left him forever with the child as promised. Years later, Ganga reappears to give Shantanu his son, ‘Devavrata’. Due to the vow of remaining unmarried throughout his life as a sort of sacrifice that he makes so that the marriage of his father and Satyawati could take place, Shantanu blesses Bhishma with the power to die when he wished.

Bhishma had never thought of anything in return for his sacrifice. Being trapped in this world, he had no choice to find release. Karve points out that he was not burdened by the power to rule or marry. He was gifted to die at will and he was free to leave the world. “ The caged bird had at last found an escape . But the destiny born with Bhishma once again cast him back to fetters”( *Yuganta* 20).

The palace of Maya shows a greater struggle in which the newly arrived Aryans and the Nagas , the older inhabitants of the land were locked for generations. The main motive of the struggle was the greed for the land. The events leading to Mayasabha (the palace of Maya) shows that it was another method of gaining land. Dhritrashtra was forced to give a part of the kingdom to Pandavas as they escaped the attempt to be murdered and emerged with stronger allies. The town ‘Khandavaprastha’ surrounded by great forests near the banks of river Yamuna was given to them. The Pandavas named it ‘Indraprastha- The city of Gods’. It was Maya who built the great palace for the Pandavas. Dharma performed the Rajasuya Yagna. The Kauravas were dazzled looking at the birds, animals and trees which were made of precious stones and looked real. Flowing water was made to look dry and dry land almost rippled like water. Duryodhana was utterly confused and bumped against the walls, tucked up his garments while walking on a dry land and fell into the pool thinking of it as the dry land. Dharma helped Duryodhana out of water but Draupadi and Bhima laughed at him. Duryodhana did not forget this humiliation and the same was taken care of in the incident of the dice and Draupadi's humiliation.

The case of Ashvattama doomed to a life more than death is an instance of the loss of smriti. Smriti refers to memory and consciousness. The Gita's description of the chain of causality ending in man's destruction is well known as , “Anger leads to the loss of consciousness, loss of consciousness brings about confusion in memory, which, leads in turn , to the loss of the thinking power. And the loss of the thinking power destroys a person” (*Yuganta* 121). Smriti makes us realize our duties and where his paths lead to. In the Mahabharata, the question ‘who am I?’ means “what is my place?” Bhishma recognized his smriti throughout his life and Arjuna gained his after the divine Gita imparted by God Krishna while Ashvattama lost it and was doomed forever.

The ‘Women,’ according to the Karve from Amba to Kunti and Madri suffered and cursed Bhishma. They thought that he alone was responsible for their humiliation . Yet, Bhishma sacrificed himself completely. He no longer lived for himself but for the Kuru clan. *The Mahabharata* emphasises that human life, whether lived for oneself or spent in unselfish endeavour must inevitably result in wrong to others. It was Bhishma who looked after the welfare of the children of the Kuru clan of Hastinapura. He fulfilled every duty of a Kshatriya and, “all duties ended, with a boon allowing him to die at will in his possession, he could have escaped the world but wouldn't due to his vows” (*Yuganta* 25).

Gandhari , on the other hand, was a good mother and wanted the kinship of Hastinapura with Duryodhana. After the war started, she was a different person altogether. She would rather think:

Today, how many [of her sons ] were left ... All my life, their moments of happiness were my moments of happiness, their moments of sadness were mine ... Today, I have become calm. Now, there is nobody for whom I can be anxious for. My mind is now completely at peace. There is nothing to hope for, nothing to fear (*Yuganta* 32).

During the last days of Gandhari's life in the foot of the Himalayas, she recalls the country of Gandhara. Dhritarashtra asks Gandhari for forgiveness and persuades her to give up fighting against life. He wants her to take off the blindfold. He tells her that their life is nearly over and at least she should not die with her eyes bound. To this, Gandhari replies that she has already uncovered her eyes but she still cannot see clearly. Her decision to walk into the fire soothes Dhirtarastra , Vidura and Kunti to do the same. It was her decision not to wait for death but to walk towards it.

Nandini points out that the making of some lives is entirely in the hand of others , especially as in the case of Kunti She never complained but gave it a expression by adding the glory of a Kshatriya woman. Pandu, on his conquering expedition defeated many kings but presented it all to his eldest brother. Madri escapes the pitiable life of Kunti by making a choice, “Kunti, [Pandur] died because of me. Let me follow him. I could never be

impartial between your children and mine ... Take them in your care” (*Yuganta* 46). Kunti, now, had to travel the hard stony path of her life all alone. She very well knew that Pandavas were never really received as Princes.

Kunti is depicted as the person who foils the plot of her sons' rivals from the incident of Bhishma's poisoning to building a palace out of combustible material. She is portrayed as a true Kshatriya women . After the wedding of the Sons' , she yearned for a quiet life but she was unlucky to have one. Kunti's suffering and hope during the year of her sons' exile is portrayed in Udyogaparva. Kunti could not accompany her sons into exile as she was old and fragile. She suffered greater agonies because she had to live among the enemies and witness their prowess and prosperity.

The mother Kunti also reminded Dharma that he must either defeat his enemies or be killed. Yet, Dharma's condemnation of Kunti was sweeping and merciless. He blames Kunti for the entire war of *The Mahabharata*. Dharma says, “ Your secret has destroyed all of us- the Kurus and the Panchalas are no more. Draupadi's sons and Abhimanyu are dead. If you had told us that time that Karna belonged to us, there would be no war... [And then he curses] Henceforth [all womanhood] shall be incapable of keeping a secret “(*Yuganta* 55). During the last days of her life, Kunti does not long for any wish or enjoyment of this life when she chooses the path of austerity to serve her in-laws who wronged her every time.

Draupadi was the living symbol of the Pandavas new position. The day Arjuna won her and brought her home, his mother unwittingly said, “Whatever you have brought today, share equally with your brothers as always” (*Yuganta* 77) which changes her life forever. Draupadi was shamefully dragged into the assembly of Kauravas . She was shamefully dishonoured but she saved the Pandavas when they were about to drown in the sea of disgrace. Karve depicts that the end of *The Mahabharata* is not merely the end of Draupadi or the end of Pandavas or their clan. It is the end of a Yuga. Draupadi suffered when her sons were killed treacherously. During her last breath, Draupadi tells Bhima, “In our next birth, be the eldest, Bhima. Under your shelter we can all live in safety and joy” (*Yuganta* 95).

Each major character in *The Mahabharata* is defeated by life. No one achieves complete success in life and even its partial fulfillment. Dharma, even after defeating all his enemies did not taste victory at all. Karna is also one such example where fate plays a cruel part in his disposition. Karna was constantly asking the question “who am I?” throughout his life. He was tied to Duryodhana out of gratitude than affection. When he accepted the friendship of Duryodhana, he became the sworn enemy of the Pandavas and his choice of Duryodhana over Arjun and his mother Kunti defeated him forever.

Here, Yuga meant one-fourth of the cycle of the universe in Sanskrit. It also means the end of the epoch- of Bhishma, of Gandhari, of Kunti, of Karna, of Draupadi , of Ashvattama and of the millions of warriors who fought the war. *The Mahabharata* teaches us that the wheel of life turns at a certain speed in one direction and it does not change. Whatever was done was done as a duty or as an unavoidable task. Nothing was done for the sake of happiness . Here, “one did one’s duty not because of any expected reward, but because one wanted to live with honour and die with honour” ( *Yuganta* 185).

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