



Gandhari Beyond the Epic: A Feminist Interpretation of Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari*

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Abstract: Contemporary Indian mythological fiction increasingly revisits classic narratives through the perspectives of women whose voices have often been marginalised in epic literature. Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari* (2019) plays a key role in this literary movement by reimagining Gandhari, a frequently overlooked female character from the *Mahabharata*, as a psychologically rich and emotionally layered protagonist. While traditional interpretations tend to portray Gandhari as a symbol of sacrifice, devotion and maternal suffering, Banerjee portrays her as an individual who navigates identity, agency, duty and desire within a patriarchal society.

This study examines *The Curse of Gandhari* through the lenses of Revisionist feminist criticism and Psychoanalytic feminist criticism. Through a careful textual analysis, the paper shows that Gandhari's resistance does not come from open rebellion but instead from moral authority, psychological strength, and ethical self-awareness. The study also argues that the novel makes a major contribution to contemporary feminist mythological fiction by focusing on women's inner lives and questioning traditional views of women in epics.

Keywords: Revisionist Feminism, Psychoanalytic Feminism, Female Agency, Mythological Retellings, Female Subjectivity

Introduction

यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र।
यत्रेहास्ति न तत् क्वचित्॥

Adi Parva, 56:33, The *Mahabharata*

"What is in here may be found elsewhere;
but what is not here can not be found anywhere else!"

(Adapted Translation)

The *Mahabharata* holds a central place in India's literary and cultural landscape. As one of the longest epics in the world, it has shaped philosophical thought, religious discussions, ethical reflections, and artistic expression for centuries. While the epic is often praised for its exploration of *dharma*, kingship, war and morality, modern literary scholarship has increasingly focused on the women whose experiences have historically been overshadowed by male heroes and leaders.

The feminist mythological fiction in India has significantly transformed the way epic narratives are interpreted and portrayed. Female characters, traditionally pushed to the story's periphery, are being revisited by modern writers from their point of view. Such works not only recover silenced voices, but also encourage readers to rethink established beliefs about gender, power and agency within mythological traditions.



Gandhari Beyond the Epic: Contextual Framework of the Study

Gandhari is best known as the blindfolded queen of Hastinapur, the wife of the blind king Dhritrashtra and the mother of the hundred Kauravas. This recognition is often in terms of her relationship with the male figures or their positions. Many traditional interpretations limit her identity to these symbolic roles, depicting her as an ideal wife who voluntarily accepts blindness and a tragic mother who witnesses the downfall of her entire family. However, the epic also offers glimpses of a woman with significant moral insight, political awareness and emotional depth. Yet these aspects remain underexplored, since the epic story is largely told from the perspective of men. As a result, Gandhari's voice is often shaped by others rather than being expressed independently.

Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari* (2019) serves as a vital intervention in this context. By placing Gandhari at the centre of the narrative, Banerjee shifts focus from epic battles and dynastic politics to the emotional and psychological experiences of a woman navigating restrictions imposed by patriarchal structures. The significance of Banerjee's retelling lies in its ability to humanise a character who has often been idealised or pushed to the margins. The novel presents Gandhari not as a passive victim, but as an active interpreter of her life. Her choices, doubts, frustrations and emotional conflicts take the centre stage.

This study explores *The Curse of Gandhari* through Revisionist feminist criticism and Psychoanalytic feminist criticism. Through revisioning, the novel challenges the patriarchal views that have historically defined Gandhari primarily through her relationships with men. Psychoanalytic feminist criticism provides a complementary viewpoint by delving into Gandhari's inner life. The novel pays significant attention to her emotional experiences, including feelings of betrayal, repression, anxiety, guilt, grief and self-discovery. By examining Gandhari's character through revisionist and psychoanalytic feminist lenses, the study aims to add to the growing scholarship on feminist mythological fiction and underscore the continuing relevance of epic women in current literary discussions.

Literature Review

Gandhari's character has drawn interest from historians, literary critics and feminist scholars who want to understand her role in the *Mahabharata*. Traditional studies often portrayed Gandhari through the lens of ideal womanhood, emphasising her devotion, sacrifice, and maternal suffering. These readings usually celebrated her blindfold as a sign of loyalty to her husband and primarily viewed her life in terms of her family obligations.

Irawati Karve's *Yuganta* (2008) is one of the earliest modern studies that reinterprets epic characters with a humanistic approach. Karve depicts Gandhari as a noble and tragic figure shaped by duty, loss and moral responsibility. While she acknowledges Gandhari's emotional pain, Karve also points out her intellectual depth and ethical insight. A.H. Salunkhe (2003) takes a more critical look at Gandhari's place within patriarchal systems. His analysis highlights the limitations placed on women in the epic and interprets Gandhari's blindfold as a reflection of social expectations that pressured wives to put their husbands first. Research by scholars like Kevin McGrath (2011) on women in the *Mahabharata* further highlights Gandhari's moral authority and her connection to Dharma. McGrath notes that Gandhari often serves as a source of ethical wisdom in the epic. She consistently tries to prevent the Kuru dynasty's moral decline. These studies show that Gandhari's role goes beyond simple endurance; it includes active engagement with issues of justice and responsibility.

Scholars such as M. Kahlon (2011) and J. Ambewadikar (2017) highlight Gandhari's agency and her ability to negotiate patriarchal constraints through moral authority and adherence to *dharma*. Similarly, D. Verma (2020) examines Gandhari alongside Satyawati and Kunti, emphasising her role in dynastic continuity and the emotional responsibilities associated with motherhood.

While existing research has largely focused on Gandhari as a symbol of sacrifice, maternal devotion and moral integrity, relatively little attention has been paid to her emotional struggles, silences and subjective experiences,



particularly in contemporary retellings. Moreover, the limited studies on Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari*, such as Vinita and Gupta's *Supernatural Elements in Aditi Banerjee's The Curse of Gandhari* (2025) and Pragati Prasad's *Contemporary Narratives and Ancient Customs: A Study of Hindu Traditions in Aditi Banerjee's The Curse of Gandhari* (2024), primarily explore supernatural and cultural dimensions of the novel.

Research Gap

The review of existing scholarship uncovers several important gaps.

1. Traditional studies of Gandhari have mainly focused on her roles as a wife and mother, resulting in minimal exploration of her personal identity and psychological complexity.
2. Though feminist scholars have acknowledged Gandhari's agency, there are relatively few studies that examine how modern retellings reconstruct her voice through revisionist narrative methods.
3. The critical analysis of *The Curse of Gandhari* is still limited and largely thematic. There is not enough scholarly attention on psychoanalytic and revisionist feminist approaches that could shed light on Gandhari's emotional struggles, repression, grief and self-realisation processes.

This study seeks to address these gaps by analysing Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari* through the combined lenses of revisionist feminist criticism and psychoanalytic feminist criticism.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims:

- To examine the revisionist portrayal of Gandhari in Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari*
- To explore Gandhari's emotional and psychological experiences using a psychoanalytic feminist framework
- To evaluate how *The Curse of Gandhari* contributes to contemporary feminist mythological fiction.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis and feminist literary criticism. The primary source for this research is Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari* (2019). Secondary sources include critical studies on Gandhari, feminist literary theory, psychoanalytic feminist criticism and scholarship on mythological retellings.

Theoretical Framework

Revisionist Feminist Criticism

Revisionist feminist criticism challenges patriarchal portrayals found in classic texts. Feminist critics argue that traditional literary narratives often marginalise women's experiences and prioritise masculine perspectives. This process of revisioning aims to recover silenced voices and reconstruct female identity. In *The Curse of Gandhari*, revisionist feminism shifts the narrative focus, as Gandhari is no longer a secondary character whose importance comes from her relationship with men. Instead, she becomes the main presence through which events occur and are experienced and understood.

Psychoanalytic Feminist Criticism

Psychoanalytic feminist criticism examines the relationship between gender, identity and psychological experience. It explores how social structures influence and shape emotional development, self-perception and relationships. This perspective is especially useful for analysing how literature portrays women affected by



patriarchal expectations. Psychoanalytic feminism examines experiences like suppression, anxiety, guilt, desire, trauma and self-realisation, acknowledging that social constraints can lead to serious psychological effects.

In Banerjee's novel, Gandhari's life is filled with emotional struggles stemming from arranged marriage, maternal duty, political powerlessness and personal loss. Her experiences highlight the psychological impact of balancing multiple social roles while trying to maintain a consistent sense of self.

It is felt that combining revisionist and psychoanalytic feminist theories would allow for a deeper understanding of Gandhari both as a recovered narrative voice and a psychologically complex individual.

The Feminist Analysis of Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari*

Reclaiming Gandhari's Narrative Voice

One of Banerjee's notable achievements is the restoration of Gandhari's voice. Conventional retellings often depict Gandhari through the eyes of male characters, reducing her role to mere symbols of sacrifice and motherhood. Banerjee shifts the narrative focus from kings and warriors to Gandhari herself. The reader experiences the epic not through the eyes of men with political ambition or military glory, but through the lens of a woman striving to comprehend and navigate the challenges in her life. This shift transforms Gandhari from a passive historical figure into an active interpreter of events.

The novel illustrates that Gandhari possesses intellectual depth, emotional sensitivity and moral insight. By bringing her thoughts and feelings to the forefront, Banerjee uncovers dimensions of her character that traditional narratives often overlook. Gandhari emerges not as a supporting character in men's stories, but as a protagonist with experiences that have their own significance.

The Blindfold as Resistance and Psychological Expression

The blindfold serves as the most recognisable symbol linked to Gandhari. Conventional narratives often celebrate it as a supreme demonstration of devotion. Banerjee, however, offers a different interpretation of this gesture. Instead of viewing the blindfold merely as a symbol of loyalty, the novel portrays it as a reaction to betrayal and loss of control. Gandhari is denied the chance to shape her future and becomes part of a political arrangement she cannot navigate. The blindfold, thus, symbolises her struggle to reclaim agency.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the blindfold also symbolises an internal psychological battle. Unable to challenge the patriarchal authority directly, Gandhari expresses resistance through her self-imposed blindness. This act reveals mixed feelings of anger, frustration, helplessness and determination. In this way, Banerjee's reinterpretation changes this familiar symbol into a complex expression of psychological resistance and emotional protest.

Marriage and the Crisis of Identity

Marriage signifies the beginning of Gandhari's transformation from a princess to a queen. Revisionist feminist criticism illustrates how patriarchal systems often reduce women to instruments of political and social exchange. Gandhari's matrimonial alliance exemplifies the same reality. Her individual aspirations take a backseat to dynastic interests, and she is expected to accept decisions made for her or on her behalf. The novel highlights its emotional repercussions, as Gandhari experiences disappointment, uncertainty and anger while attempting to reconcile her expectations with reality.

Psychoanalytic feminism sheds light on the identity crisis caused by such circumstances. Gandhari is compelled to relinquish aspects of her previous self while adapting to a new societal role. This process creates tension between personal desires and social obligations, leading to persistent psychological struggle. Banerjee, thus,



portrays marriage not as an emotional fulfilment, but rather as a stage for emotional negotiation and self-transformation.

Motherhood and Psychological Burden

Traditional interpretations often idealise Gandhari's maternal devotion, reducing her primarily to the role of the mother of the Kauravas. Banerjee complicates this image by exploring the emotional truths of motherhood. Gandhari's identity becomes deeply tied to her children, especially Duryodhana— her hopes, fears and dreams intertwine with his growth. As he increasingly embraces jealousy and hostility, Gandhari feels profound anxiety about his future. Psychoanalytic feminist criticism exposes the emotional weight of maternal responsibility. Gandhari continually questions her ability to guide her son and feels guilty when her efforts fall short. Her identity as a mother becomes both fulfilling and painful. Thus, the novel challenges idealised views of motherhood by presenting it as a complicated psychological experience marked by uncertainty, self-doubt and emotional vulnerability.

Repression and Emotional Silence

Throughout the story, Gandhari faces situations where her moral judgment is ignored. She warns about injustice, advises restraint and tries to stop conflict, yet her voice has little impact on political decisions. Her character is, thus, marked by a continuous struggle between love, kindness and duty, blame and self-realisation. Psychoanalytic feminism interprets this frequent experience as a form of emotional repression. Gandhari internalises her frustration and disappointment because social structures deny her meaningful authority. This inability to act on her awareness generates psychological tension.

The novel illustrates how patriarchal silencing goes beyond external limitations and influences internal emotional life. Paranjape, in her lecture series, addresses Gandhari as 'डोळस' (insightful): होईल तितकं, स्वतःच्या प्रयत्नांनी वाईटाला थोपवून धरणं आणि चांगल्याचा पुरस्कार करणं एवढं काम तरी केलं आणि म्हणून डोळे नसूनही गांधारी दृष्टी किंवा डोळस आहे (Translation: *To the best of her ability, she tried to restrain evil and promote good through her own efforts, and for this reason, even without eyesight, Gandhari is considered to have vision or be insightful.*).

Gandhari, Draupadi and Shared Female Experience

Banerjee's depiction of Gandhari's reaction to Draupadi's humiliation is an important revisionist feminist intervention. This episode goes beyond political rivalry and emphasises shared female vulnerability. Gandhari understands that Draupadi's humiliation is part of a larger pattern of patriarchal oppression and thus her empathy stems not from political loyalty but from an awareness of the precarious position women occupy in royal society. The novel, thus, underscores feminist consciousness based on shared experience. Women connect through common struggles against systems that limit their freedom and reduce them to tools for male ambition.

Grief and Maternal Trauma

The Kurukshetra war represents the peak of Gandhari's psychological journey. The deaths of her sons shatter the foundations of her identity. Psychoanalytic feminist criticism offers a strong framework for interpreting her response. Gandhari experiences grief not just as loss but as a crisis of identity. Banerjee depicts grief as an ongoing psychological process instead of a single emotional event. Gandhari continually wrestles with questions of responsibility and fate. She struggles to grasp how personal choices relate to historical outcomes. This portrayal of maternal trauma adds significant psychological depth to the novel and sets it apart from more conventional depictions of women in epic narratives.



The Curse as the Return of Repressed Emotion

The curse directed at Krishna marks the peak of Gandhari's emotional journey. Psychoanalytic feminist criticism views this moment as the release of long-held anger and grief. For most of her life, Gandhari has repressed emotions that she cannot express openly. After the war, these feelings explode through the curse. This act becomes a powerful assertion of voice after decades of silence. Revisionist feminism interprets the curse as a moment of narrative empowerment. Gandhari claims the authority to judge even divine beings. She rejects passive acceptance and demands accountability for her suffering. Thus, the curse serves as both a psychological release and a feminist assertion.

Self-Realisation and Feminist Subjectivity

The final stage of Gandhari's journey involves self-reflection and acceptance. Having lost her family and social identity, she must confront herself beyond the roles imposed on her. Psychoanalytic feminism sees this process as a journey toward psychological integration. Gandhari slowly gains a better understanding of her strengths, limitations, and experiences. She learns to find meaning not just from external relationships but from her internal self-awareness.

Revisionist feminism similarly recognises this change as the emergence of female subjectivity. Gandhari ultimately becomes more than a wife, mother, or queen. She evolves into an autonomous individual with experiences that hold value independent of patriarchal definitions. Banerjee concludes Gandhari's story not with defeat but with self-realisation.

Significance of the Study

This study makes an attempt to contribute to the growing scholarship on feminist mythological fiction by examining Gandhari through revisionist and psychoanalytic feminist lenses. It shows how modern retellings recover overlooked female voices and contest patriarchal readings of traditional narratives.

The research also highlights the psychological depth of women in epics and underscores the role of emotional experience in understanding female agency. By focusing on Gandhari's inner life, the study broadens conversations about women's roles in mythological literature and contributes to current feminist literary criticism.

Conclusion

Aditi Banerjee's *The Curse of Gandhari*, thus, makes an important feminist contribution to the tradition of the *Mahabharata* retellings. By recovering Gandhari's voice and exploring her psychological experiences, the novel transforms a sidelined epic character into a complex protagonist.

The study illustrates that Gandhari's agency arises not from outright rebellion but from moral insight, emotional strength and psychological perseverance. By emphasising her perspective, Banerjee encourages readers to rethink traditional views of epic womanhood and recognise the deep importance of women's experiences within mythological stories.

To conclude, *The Curse of Gandhari*, as a representative of the revisionist genre, urges readers to see the *Mahabharata* not just as a tale of kings and warriors, but also as a story shaped by the emotions, struggles and wisdom of women.

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