
Exploring Gandhari's Silence as Resistance in S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*

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Abstract:

S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* reinterprets the Mahabharata by presenting its characters within a realistic and human-centred narrative. In this framework, Gandhari emerges as a deeply reflective figure whose silence conveys resilience, awareness, and inner strength. Her self-imposed blindfold often idealised in tradition as an act of supreme devotion is portrayed in *Parva* as a spontaneous response to her challenging circumstances. Over time, this gesture acquires cultural significance as those around her elevate it into a symbol of virtue. Bhyrappa's retelling thus invites readers to recognise how personal choices can evolve into revered narratives. Gandhari's silence operates on multiple levels emotional, ethical, and existential. Her dialogues with Krishna and Dhritarashtra and her private reflections reveal an insightful mind quietly negotiating the expectations placed upon her. This paper analyses how Gandhari's silence functions simultaneously as endurance, introspection, and subtle resistance. By examining her monologues and interactions in *Parva*, the study highlights how Bhyrappa portrays her as a poised and contemplative presence whose silent strength adds depth to the epic's ethical world.

Keywords: resilience, resistance, retelling, silence, strength,

Introduction

Gandhari has mostly been recalled as a silent character in the long tradition of Mahabharata retellings, most notably for her self-imposed blindfold, which has been seen as the pinnacle of wifely devotion. Conventional interpretations create her as the pativrata, the loving woman who gives up her own vision to share her husband's blindness, and exalt her

silence as a sign of spiritual loyalty and perseverance. However, instead of seeing Gandhari as a woman with her own subjectivity, agency, and complex emotional world, such interpretations run the risk of turning her to a symbol of chastity. *Parva* by S. L. Bhyrappa, which was first published in Kannada and then translated into English by K. Raghavendra Rao (Sahitya Akademi, 2024), deconstructs the mythological atmosphere of the Mahabharata and recasts its protagonists as historical people. In this account, Gandhari's silence is interpreted as a reaction to coercion, shame, and disillusionment rather than as unquestioning devotion. Once interpreted as a lofty pledge, her blindfold is now reinterpreted as an impetuous protest against being forced into marriage to Dhritarashtra, a man who was selected for her against her will. The ensuing silence is multi-layered, it hides her sorrow, hides her resentment, and ironically, it gives her a subtly effective form of resistance to patriarchal structures that seek to elevate her pain and suffering.

Dr. Prasanna Deshpande in his article says that, "Although the novel *Parva* is a realistic rendering of the great epic Mahabharata focussing mainly on the epic war which is essentially an affair among the men of the times, the driving forces of the war, the main reasons of the war are not devoid of the role and significance of the women, of the complexity arising out of the man-woman relationship presented in the narrative of the novel *Parva*. Kunti, the mother of Pandavas, Gandhari, the mother of Kauravas and Draupadi, the lone wife of the Pandavas are anything but passive in the overall unfolding of the epic narrative" (2023). Bhyrappa's Gandhari emerges as a truly tragic character. She acknowledges her fate but never reconciles with it; she is praised as a goddess but dislikes the vacuous veneration. She is honoured as the mother of a hundred sons but secretly laments her lack of free will and doubts the value of her children. She is the epitome of the paradox of resistance through silence; her reluctance to justify her husband's ostentatious remarks, her sour thoughts on motherhood, her subdued criticism of Dhritarashtra's adultery, and her thoughtful answers to Krishna's pointed questions all reveal a woman who resists not by overt rebellion but by refusing to submit to societal glory. This paper places Gandhari's silence within the interpretive framework of resistance. By closely analysing her dialogues in *Parva*, it explores how silence serves as a subtle tactic of endurance, dissent, and silent defiance rather than only as a sign of passivity. Thus, the study aims to recast Gandhari as a historically human figure whose silence symbolizes the tragedy and resiliency of women trapped in rigid systems of the society, rather than as a glorified figure of sacrifice.

Gandhari's Blindfold as Impulse, Protest, and Silence

The act of blindfolding herself has defined Gandhari's image in the Mahabharata for centuries, often being upheld as the supreme gesture of loyalty, sacrifice, and chastity. Traditional narratives celebrate her decision as an embodiment of pativrata dharma, a woman's duty to share her husband's fate in body, mind, and spirit. But in *Parva*, this is

recast as an act of uncontrolled impulse that emerges from resistance and frustration rather than spiritual devotion. Gandhari herself recalls the incident in deeply human terms: “I tore a strip impulsively from the upper cloth I was wearing and declared, ‘If you insist on giving me away in marriage to that blind fellow, I shall never set my eyes on him.’ Then I covered my eyes tightly with that strip of cloth. Even this act of mine didn’t melt father’s heart. Perhaps he thought I would reconcile to my fate, give up my stubbornness after three or four days and take off the cover. Well he put me in a bridal palanquin and sent me away to this land as blind man’s bride.” (921)

A strong sense of helplessness shows in this account. Gandhari’s blindfold is a desperate protest against a societal system that denies her choice in marriage, not an act of great sacrifice. It is both rebellion and submission. Submission in its eventual permanence when her protest is unable to influence her father or change her fate, and rebellion in its impetuous refusal to see the spouse thrust upon her. Therefore, her current silence is not a passive act of resignation but rather a multi-layered form of resistance, an admission that, despite the fact that her voice is helpless against the authority, her body can yet bear witness to her protest by wearing a blindfold.

It further highlights how this act, born in protest, is gradually appropriated by the Kuru elders and reinterpreted as a narrative of divine devotion. Gandhari herself reflects bitterly on this transformation: “They sang my praise, called me, ‘Great devotee committed to the husband-cult! She has sacrificed her sight to share with her husband his blindness... The spot her feet tread is sacred. The land where she lives will overflow with wealth and prosperity, and so on...’ How they heaped praise after praise on me, and built a legend round me! In the beginning, such praise used to infuriate me. I believe one begins to relish the taste of such praise sooner or later. I got used to it, began to enjoy it, and time passed, did not want to lose it. I believed in the legend that the land where I lived prospered, that victory was with my side.” (922).

The method by which society turn women’s pain into virtue is revealed here. The original meaning of Gandhari’s impetuous act of defiance, protest is silenced as it is appropriated and exalted into a story of wifely devotion. Gandhari’s silence in the face of such glorification is telling because, while she does not fully embrace it, she also declines to publicly challenge it. Rather, she expresses her displeasure inside, later admits that she enjoys the praise but she still knows that the story is untrue. This paradox situates Gandhari’s blindfold as both a weapon and a prison. In addition to being her most permanent act of resistance against the conditions of her marriage, it imprisons her within the narrative of

servitude wifhood that is extolled by Bhishma and the Kuru elders. At the same time, it remains her most enduring gesture of resistance against the conditions of her marriage.

The silence that surrounds this act emphasize its complexity, Gandhari does not publicly refute the legend built around her, but her private reflections reveal a woman whose silence conceals critique. As a result, the blindfold serves as the primary metaphor for Gandhari's existence in *Parva*. It is a gesture that both defines and erases her identity, a silence that both hides and expresses her suffering, and an impulsive resistance that is wrapped in the storytelling. As Gayatri Spivak's idea of the 'subaltern woman's muteness' suggests, Gandhari's voice is both present and unheard. Her protest is preserved in the act of blindfolding, but its meaning is overwritten by patriarchal glorification. In this way, Gandhari in *Parva* embodies resistance through silence. Her refusal to see is not devotion but protest, her muteness not absence but critique. The blindfold is the first and most enduring symbol of her silent defiance.

Silence as Protest against Marriage and Motherhood

Marriage and motherhood, traditionally celebrated as the cornerstones of a woman's fulfillment, but for Gandhari in *Parva* it become sites of frustration, humiliation, and silent resistance. Her marriage to Dhritarashtra is marked not by companionship but by coercion, infidelity, and alienation. In this context, Gandhari's silence assumes the role of a veiled protest, a refusal to endorse or glorify the very institutions through which her subjugation is maintained. Her marriage, far from being a union of equals, is defined by betrayal and neglect. Gandhari's bitterly ironic remark to her husband reveals the hollowness of marital fidelity in her life, "Are they blind-folded like me to surrender their men to servant-maids?" (737). This question, posed with sharp sarcasm, pierces through the myth of her idealized devotion. Gandhari's silence here is not ignorance, it is deliberate restraint, choosing irony over open confrontation. By voicing her critique in a rhetorical question, she undermines her husband's authority without entering into direct rebellion. Her silence, therefore, is not passive but strategic. It allows her to articulate dissent while still surviving within the suffocating expectations of pativrata. In one of the scholarly article stated that, "Women are perhaps the most misunderstood and misrepresented figures in the annals of history." (Singh and Dubey 62).

Motherhood, too, becomes another terrain of Gandhari's muted protest. In the epic, Gandhari's identity is bound to the notion of being the mother of a hundred sons. Yet, in *Parva*, she strips away this myth and exposes its artificiality and says, "The count of hundred is to the Maharaja's credit. That is his account. But the sons borne by this servant-maid, with the name Gandhari, were only fourteen. A son-in-law has also died. This is the size of my sorrow, a small one. Not as large as Maharaja's." (919). By refusing to bear the weight of a

false narrative, Gandhari reclaims her reality in this instance. Finally, she breaks her silence regarding the praise of a hundred sons with a subtle yet devastating dismissal ‘fourteen’ rather than ‘a hundred’. This minimalism is potent because it reduces her pain to a very human level rather than giving it grandeur. Her silence in the face of this praise is resistance, by withholding public endorsement, she allows the praise to exist while privately deconstructing it.

Gandhari’s account of her forced initiation into motherhood further underscores her resistance, she says, “Bhishma was impatient that I had not become pregnant. I didn’t know anything. This husband of mine didn’t know a thing. Later I believe a servant-maid taught him all about sex. Then we slept together, I began to bear children one after another. And he also slept with the servant-maids in the palace and they too began to bear sons. It is said they were one hundred. O don’t know. Who can count the piglets? I bore only fourteen sons and a daughter.” (921). There is contempt in this narration. Gandhari completely de-romanticizes parenting by comparing her kids to ‘piglets’. She opposes the glorification of female fertility by revealing the crude reality of her celebrated status as ‘the mother of a hundred sons’. Feminist writer Adrienne Rich argue that motherhood in patriarchal cultures is idealized to mask women’s exploitation. Gandhari’s bitterness echoes this critique, since she accepts the biological effort involved in reproduction but denies its sanctification.

Therefore, her silence is a reluctance to take part in the myth-making of her own motherhood rather than a sign of compliance. She describes herself as a woman forced into sexual initiation, burdened by undesired fertility, and overshadowed by her husband’s illicit affairs with servant-women, despite the fact that the public views her as an epic mother. By withholding her voice in public and breaking it only in moments of private confession, Gandhari redefines silence as protest. Through this silence, Gandhari in *Parva* destabilizes two of the most revered institutions in the society, marriage and motherhood. She refuses to glorify her coerced marriage as loyalty and her biological role as divinely ordained fertility. Instead, her muted, ironic, and understated responses become her mode of defiance, a survival strategy within a world where women’s voices are consistently overwritten by the societal system.

Gandhari’s Silence against patriarchal Glorification

One of the most striking dimensions of Gandhari’s silence in *Parva* is her refusal to validate the grandiose praises heaped upon her by the society and family members. The Kuru elders and Dhritarashtra repeatedly attempt to sanctify her suffering, transforming her life of compulsion into a legend of divine sacrifice. Yet Gandhari’s response is telling, not open confrontation, but deliberate silence, a form of resistance that exposes the emptiness of their words. Dhritarashtra himself lauds her with exalted praise, “Great Lady, you are a goddess

who came into this Kuru lineage as its saviour.” (732). The weight of this praise is intended not only to glorify Gandhari but also to stabilize the patriarchal order. By calling her a ‘goddess’ Dhritarashtra denies her humanity and her suffering, reducing her lived experience to a mere thing meant to inspire reverence and obedience. Such praise attempts to overwrite her anger, frustrations, and disappointments with the aura of sanctity.

Gandhari’s choice of silence in response to such declarations is deliberate. By refusing to reply, she resists the patriarchal demand for affirmation. Silence here functions as non-consent, a refusal to internalize or endorse the idealized identity imposed upon her. Rather than being passive, her silence becomes active resistance, undermining the symbolic power of Dhritarashtra’s words. This dynamic can be read through the lens of Michel Foucault’s analysis of discourse and power in his book *The History of Sexuality* patriarchal society produces ‘truths’ about women such as the sanctity of sacrifice or the divinity of motherhood, that serve to discipline and control them. Gandhari’s silence refuses to reproduce this ‘truth’, destabilizing its authority. Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak opinions, silence has been reclaimed as a form of counter-discourse, where not speaking can itself be a radical act of defiance against oppressive narratives. Gandhari embodies this paradoxical agency by withholding speech, she withholds validation, leaving Dhritarashtra’s praise suspended and rejected.

Her reflections to Krishna make this tension clearer. She recalls how Bhishma and others turned her blindfold into legend, “They sang my praise, called me, ‘Great devotee committed to the husband-cult! She has sacrificed her sight to share with her husband his blindness... How they heaped praise after praise on me, and built a legend round me! In the beginning, such praise used to infuriate me... I got used to it, began to enjoy it, and time passed, did not want to lose it” (922). This confession reveals the double bind of patriarchal glorification. On one hand, Gandhari sees through the falsity of such praise and resents the myth-making that denies her agency. On the other, she admits to having grown accustomed to it, even enjoying the honour and reverence it brought her. Her silence thus becomes not only resistance but also compromise, reflecting the complex ways in which women internalize societal ideals while simultaneously critiquing them.

This portrayal complicates the simplistic image of Gandhari as a silent sufferer. Her refusal to respond to Dhritarashtra’s exalted words is not mere passivity, it is an assertion of selfhood through non-engagement. By choosing silence, Gandhari retains control over her response, asserting a boundary against patriarchal appropriation of her life. Yet, her later admission of enjoying the praise underscores the insidious power of patriarchal discourse: resistance and complicity coexist within the same silence. Thus, Gandhari’s silence against

patriarchal glorification is profoundly ambivalent. It exposes the hollowness of the myths created around her while also revealing the difficulty of escaping them. Her muteness functions as both refusal and survival strategy, allowing her to navigate a world that seeks to sanctify her suffering into legend. In this way, Bhyrappa reconfigures Gandhari's silence into a mode of resistance that is subtle, paradoxical, and deeply human.

Silence as Reflection, Anguish, and Counter-Narrative

If Gandhari's silence in *Parva* begins as protest and evolves into resistance against traditional glorification, it deepens further into a space of personal reflection and anguished counter-narrative. Through her inner monologues and confessions to Krishna, she reframes her silence not as empty submission but as a repository of suppressed rage, grief, and critique. In this sense, her silence functions as a hidden text beneath the official narrative of the epic, offering an alternative history of her life and of the Kaurava lineage. A central moment of reflection arises in her comparison of herself with Kunti. Gandhari's voice here is filled with bitterness and resignation. "Irrespective of my own desire, I had to blind-fold myself and become blind, receive the worthless semen of a blind husband, and give birth to poor quality offspring, and suffer. You, Kunti, are more fortunate and more merited spiritually. Had I your opportunities, I, too, like you, would have borne brave and wise sons. And this final defeat in war might have been avoided" (930).

This reflection is telling in several ways. First, Gandhari refuses to idealize her own motherhood. She does not shy away from describing her children as 'poor quality offspring', a phrase that collapses the epic grandeur of the Kauravas into an image of tragic failure. Second, by comparing herself with Kunti, she destabilizes the mythic image of maternal devotion and sacrifice, revealing how women's destinies are shaped less by spiritual merit and more by structural constraints. Finally, her statement functions as a counter-narrative, while the epic glorifies her as the mother of a hundred sons, Gandhari herself reframes her role as a forced participant in a reproductive system that produced ruin rather than glory. Her silence around these reflections is significant. She does not voice these comparisons publicly, they remain internal or shared only with Krishna. This privacy is a form of resistance, it creates a separate, hidden narrative that challenges the public myth without openly confronting it. In postcolonial feminist terms, Gandhari embodies what Gayatri Spivak calls the 'subaltern woman's double bind: she cannot fully speak within patriarchal discourse without being appropriated, yet her silence harbours meanings that resist and critique the structures that silence her.

Her anguish also surfaces in her reflections on companionship with Dhritarashtra. At one point, she bitterly asks him, "Who has withdrawn the supporting hand? When did you ever hold my hands Maharaja, having lived with you for so many years, don't I know that I

have none else but you to sustain me and succour me?" (924). This cutting remark reveals the gap between the epic's glorified image of the blind royal couple and the lived reality of neglect and emotional isolation. Gandhari's words expose the emptiness of the so-called 'supporting hand' of marriage. Her silence here is not absence but irony. She voices enough to cut through the myth but leaves unsaid the full weight of her suffering, which lingers in the silences between her words.

Even her final return to blindness after briefly removing her blindfold is tinged with reflective resignation. She says, "My mind tells me that I shall not recover my sight again positively. I shall be blind as before with blind Dhritarashtra. This gives me a kind of mental peace" (937). This moment of acceptance is not defeat but rather a conscious re-entry into silence and darkness as a form of self-preservation. Gandhari chooses blindness as her final mode of resistance, refusing to see a world that has consistently denied her agency. Silence and blindness converge here, not as virtues of devotion, but as tools of survival and quiet defiance.

In these reflections, Gandhari fashions a counter-narrative to the epic's mythic grandeur. Her silence is filled with anguish, but it is also layered with critique, irony, and bitter truth-telling. By refusing to publicly endorse the patriarchal legends built around her, she creates a private, alternative discourse, one that exposes the futility of her coerced marriage, the bitterness of her forced motherhood, and the hollowness of the praises showered upon her. Bhyrappa thus presents Gandhari not as a mute sufferer but as a silent historian of her own life, whose reflections constitute a counter-narrative that depicts Gandhari in a new perspective.

Conclusion

In S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*, Gandhari emerges as one of the most complex and compelling figures, whose silence operates as a multifaceted form of resistance. From her impulsive act of blindfolding herself to her reflections on marriage, motherhood, and the patriarchal glorification surrounding her, Gandhari's muteness is neither passive submission nor mindless obedience. Rather, it is a deliberate, strategic, and deeply human mode of endurance and defiance. Gandhari's blindfold, initially an impulsive protest against a coerced marriage, becomes both a symbol of her forced compliance and an instrument of silent resistance. While the Kuru elders and society glorify her act as a mark of divine devotion, her private reflections reveal her anger and resentment, exposing the gap between myth and reality. Similarly, her silence around her marriage and motherhood functions as critique, through irony, understatement, and measured confession, she destabilizes the glorified narratives of pativrata and maternal ability that attempt to erase her suffering. Her comparisons with Kunti and her reflections on her children further underscore the subversive

potential of her silence, as she reclaims her own history against the public legend of the Kauravas.

Bhyrappa's Gandhari also challenges patriarchal glorification through deliberate non-engagement. By refusing to validate Dhritarashtra's exalted praises and the sanctified narratives built around her, she enacts a quiet but potent refusal. Silence, in this context, is both survival and resistance, it shields her from further appropriation of her agency while allowing her to preserve a private, alternative narrative of her life. This tension between silence and speech, between public myth and private truth, is central to understanding Gandhari's complex agency in *Parva*. Finally, Gandhari's reflections and acceptance of blindness reveal a profound existential dimension to her resistance. By consciously returning to darkness alongside her husband, she asserts control over her perception of the world, choosing a mental and physical state that shields her from further intrusion while affirming her autonomy. In doing so, *Parva* presents Gandhari as a figure who, though constrained by patriarchal structures, exercises subtle forms of defiance, critique, and self-preservation.

In conclusion, Gandhari's silence in *Parva* is a layered and deliberate strategy that traverses protest, motherhood, patriarchal glorification, and personal reflection. It challenges traditional epic readings that depict her solely as a passive or divine figure, positioning her instead as a historically human woman whose endurance, critique, and counter-narrative reveal the complex intersections of gender, power, and agency. Bhyrappa's reinterpretation elevates Gandhari's muteness from mere suffering to a profound, paradoxical form of resistance, offering a lens through which to reconsider the voices of women who basically silence in the epic.

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