

KRISHNA AND GANDHARI



The bit of *Mahabharata* story which is the background to this play is pretty well known.

We recognize *Gandhari* as an archetype, hailed as one of the champions of *pativrata* or marital loyalty in Indian mythology. Married to a blind king, *Dhritarashtra*, she denied herself the gift of eyesight and chose to live ‘in eternal darkness – behind a bandage’.

Here is a portrayal of *Gandhari* by taking a defining moment in the great epic *Mahabharatha* and allowing drama to explore various themes: a family’s response to the total annihilation of its offspring; a wife’s single-minded devotion to her husband, and a ‘blinding revelation’ at the end - all revealed through the combative confrontation between two principal characters. What emerges is a work of creative amalgam between tradition and mythology.

The play was first published under the name *The Cause* in June, 1939. Later, the publisher of *Manikkodi* translated it into Tamil and published it in his journal on August 1, 1939. In the 30’s *Manikkodi* exemplified a literary movement with many writers making their contributions through prose and poetry.

The Tamil version, *Kannanum Gandhariyum*, was later published by *Star Prachuram*, Madras which included the author’s two others plays *Matram Thai* (The Step Mother) and *Kiliyum Kizhiyum* (The Parrot and the Prize), the latter based on a popular *Sangam* tale – the confrontation between Lord Shiva and Poet *Nakkeeran* in the Pandyan Court.

KRISHNA & GANDHARI



(Synopsis)

After the victory of the *Pandavas* in the great *Kurukshetra* war, Queen *Gandhari* is woe-stricken. *Krishna* comes to comfort her, and gradually convinces her that she was the sole cause of all the miseries of war, for by 'blinding' her own god-given eyes, as the dutiful wife of a blind husband, she had failed to care for the children, the *Kauravas*, as only a mother could have.

Cast of characters

Gandhari in mourning
Lord Krishna as healer, comforter

KRISHNA & GANDHARI

QUEEN GANDHARI

I came to seek peace; leave me alone! Probably a jackal, taking me for dead – and now retreating! Peace . .

LORD KRISHNA

Mother, I have come to give you peace; open your eyes and see.

GANDHARI

I never saw thee before; nor need now to recognize thee with eyes. Who are you?

KRISHNA

Heaven be thanked that you are saved from looking upon the carnage and wreck that strews the earth with ghastly corpses.

GANDHARI

Ah, that's Krishna! Not the cowherd Krishna, but Krishna, the . .

KRISHNA

Krishna, the consoling messenger.

GANDHARI

What evil tongued messenger thou? By thy tongue thou might have held in leash the horrors of fratricidal war – but thy choice was to blow the conch and wake up enmities. Now that thou hast swept away all my sons, Anarchist Ambassador, what message dost thou bring to an unmothered nag?

KRISHNA

Come mother, thy Lord is in gloom – come with thy heroic peace to soothe and heal his sores.

GANDHARI

I came here at his own desire to be left alone for a while. Go to him and see that the father of the valiant hundred falls not into the grave of a coward's own rusted sword. Alas, that the ancient Kuru line dancing over rock and pebbles, leaping over boulder and hill – alas, that the royal blood rushing now to the devouring parched sands away evermore from the eyes of the world!

KRISHNA

Thank heavens that in the eternal darkness you have courted behind the bandage of your eyes you see none of the horrors around the reeking shambles.

GANDHARI

But the ears make up for the eyes. Thicker, blacker, deeper the darkness, more the stars sweeping into the ken . . Know them did I not in my halcyon virgin days? It is dawn now – for I see my darkness reddening in tune with the reddening of eastern light; but not hymns of praise nor chants of triumph greet the rainbow steeds of sunlight – jackals and wolves, kites and vultures sing their hoarse lullabies to hush my *Bharatha* babies to their gory rest.

KRISHNA

Babies? The wide world acknowledges them valorous warriors, mother! They fought nobly in the field – they didn't hide themselves in your lap or bosom . .

GANDHARI

Would that they had been ever in my lap! It is all thy work, Krishna! Thou camest as ambassador for peace, but thy heart was already set on war. When the *Gandiva* fell from the drooping shoulders of despairing and repenting Arjuna, was thine the task to goad his spiritless arm to furious deadly messages of divine slaughter? Didst thou turn back thy chariot? Oh, *Parthasarathy* – didst thou turn it back and disperse the warring hosts to the welcome arms of peace?

KRISHNA

What a curse I would have drawn upon my head – unbearable even by all the gods of heaven!

GANDHARI

They often speak of thee as God come down to bestride this weak mortal earth – but never did I believe that heresy nor can I now, after this black bestial behavior of thee in these *Bharatha* battles.

KRISHNA

Man I am, mother – I am mortal; feel me here, mother – only two arms, not four! (*He lifts her right hand to his twin shoulders.*)

GANDHARI

Yes, yes, thou art man indeed and can be crushed under a curse – a wronged mother's hoarse voiced, tear-baked curse!

KRISHNA

Curse me as thou pleasest, stern lady – but I have heard no curse escapes ever more from the sweet stoic lips of dauntless Gandhari!

GANDHARI

But think thou – canst escape Nature's laws! Will not the *Kurukshetra* holocaust of eighteen days and eighteen nights find one day an answering echo in *Yadava* Yeomen's civil strife? One day thy country's women too will be plunged in dole and desolation – even as the weeping daughters of my palace home. You can never escape – wily mischief monger!

KRISHNA

Ah, already a curse escaped your lips – betel-red it can't be, but blood-red.

GANDHARI

Ay, in the thirty-sixth year from now, when *Brihaspathi* has cycled thrice full – with portents of evil stars and sepulchral dread, thy *Yadavas* shall enact another *Kurukshetra* on the *Dwaraka* shores – and a woeful death thou shalt die in the lone shame that even thy own kinsmen should perish with their own swords – dost thou hear?

KRISHNA

Be it so then. Be it so, mother – that thy sore heart after its sudden vent of tears may now hereafter rock in peace. I accept thy curse – blessed be thou, oh, Gandhari.

GANDHARI

Bless me thou for this, shameless Krishna? I am stunned. The Pandavas have sacked my children – but have I spoken aught against them? Heaven restrain my tongue – but what victory is theirs? The dull grey victory of the clouds over the blazing sun – large, loose wisps choking the sunshine glory in a besieging crush – a clouded victory with no spine to celebrate its triumph with starry lamps or lightning festoons or rainbow arches – only the dark tresses of disheveled thunder-clouds to be drawn thicker around the face – to mingle its own piteous tears with the roaring battle's tears of blood!

KRISHNA

But the world welcomes that rain! Nay, mother the peacock soars to its heaven of ecstasy and dances to the rhythm of slow rumbling thunder . . . spreading gorgeous train and fashioning its own throne of magic hues!

GANDHARI

Peacock! Meseems rather I hear the screeching of the eagle and hawk perched profanely on temple towers. The peacock is dethroned – the vulture crouching on the *gopuram* crevices darts its eerie hunting eyes across the horizon.

KRISHNA

You cursed me, Gandhari and I am not incensed. But call not *Pandavas* vultures.

GANDHARI

But my sons were the peacocks. Oh, why should defeat visit them?

KRISHNA

They invited it.

GANDHARI

Wisdom and knowledge fought on their side. *Drona*!

KRISHNA

Drona sold wisdom and trafficked in knowledge. The richer pupil he tended more zealously and watchfully —

GANDHARI

(*Lifting her hand to Krishna's mouth*) Here wags that defaming snaky tongue of thine – I will drag it out – the tongue that . . .

KRISHNA

Tarry a while, lady. Should not the duller student claim more of the teacher's care? So it was that the great *Drona* gave his store of lore to your son.

GANDHARI

Was *Duryodhana* dull?

KRISHNA

Drona gave him his knowledge, did I say not, mother?

GANDHARI

Artful indeed is Krishna. And *Karna* too fought on my son's side. Yes, munificence unsurpassed was armour to my darlings, yet . . .

KRISHNA

Munificence opens its hearts and hands rather too readily – and lo! The armour shows a rent . . . The enemy's arrow shoots and hurts and hurls down!

GANDHARI

Yes, Krishna. The munificent *Karna* sat as a student and learnt under the munificence of my own *Duryodhana* — who lifted the charioteer boy to *Anga*'s throne!

KRISHNA

About *Karna*, shall I speak more? Hast thou heard the story – now spreading abroad?

GANDHARI

I should wonder not if he betrayed. But penance and sacrifice also fought on the side of my children. How was *Bhisma*'s side beaten? Did he too betray?

KRISHNA

Speak not of betrayals, mother. Your allies were faithful all –defame them not in their graves. Hoary age – that has passed through change and change in years long past – at last, methinks, wanted no further change. And the aged ones being nearer the grave, walked to it sooner and died! And thy sons fell with *Bhisma*.

GANDHARI

Being allies with old age? Alas, I didn't know then. If that withering twig had been cut down from tree in time – all might have been well – alas, woe me! (*sobs*)

KRISHNA

Sob not so, mother! What can I do to wipe your tears? But tears well up not – the soft bandage on thy eyes sucks the oozing drops at their very pool of birth . .

GANDHARI

Hands off, hypocrite! Touch me not, scoundrel! Off with my curse!

KRISHNA

Mother, I go then. And if it would gladden thee to know that I will seek no escape from the curse, I gladly assure thee that I accept it with no protest but with full joy. And mother, I pray thee, make it invincible by speaking it forth on the vehicle of holy water. Stay here – I will return in a moment with a cup.

GANDHARI

(*sobbing*) I won't stay – off with you! See me not again! (*runs*)

KRISHNA

(*running after her*) Then there is holier water! (*Undoes the bandage of her eyes by unloosening the knot behind the head*)

GANDHARI

Villain, villain – staining the life-long chastity of my wedded joy! Making me a traitor to the one soul living yet!

KRISHNA

Repeat the curse, mother! My hands are cupped below your eyes and have gathered sweet salt drops already. Repeat the curse – and open your eyes as I drink your sweet salted gift.

GANDHARI

And more curses too! (*She opens her eyelids*)

KRISHNA

Chant them all, dear.

GANDHARI

What is this? The bandage is off, my eyelids gape wide – but I see nothing!

KRISHNA

Wonder indeed! I see no black mirrors there with tiny picture printed inside of this horrid battle-field where we stand! And sit not there a *Vamana* – art thou really blind?

GANDHARI

I am, I am. Alas, will not the world think of Gandhari, the great pretender? Blind married to the blind? Krishna, believe me, I was not a sightless virgin. Meseems thou art God – what hast thou done to my eyes? (*distending her eyelids with her fingers*) I am blind. And without bandage – yes, without the bandage!

KRISHNA

Did you not know this before? Long ago this happened, mother. Everyday when renewing this silken scarf – after your bath . . .

GANDHARI

The court maidens, for precaution take me to a dark room and there when the old cloth is unwound – with trepidation shaking me even in dark – I close tight my eyelids not to see even that outward darkness! And when the new silk has been fastened, I am led out. True, it was everyday. But I know not the eye balls had bounded away . . .

KRISHNA

God gave you eyes – you refused them, abused them, misused them., for you disused them! And they are gone! Why should you regret?

GANDHARI

I regret not. I need have no bandage hereafter. But this I pray: let not the twin children suddenly wake up one day – and throw open the windows to shafts of golden light; make me sightless ever.

KRISHNA

(*smiling*) As you will – so will be, fear not.

GANDHARI

I now seem to sense the cause of all these terrible killings . . .

KRISHNA

Tell me, let me know.

GANDHARI

I am not sure yet . . . Leave me alone for a while.

KRISHNA

Do you think Lord *Dhrutharashtra* was the cause of all this? That he should have been firmer and sterner toward his war-mad sons?

GANDHARI

Why, why do you blame him?

KRISHNA

He was the one charioteer of all these eighteen-day bloodshed, say some. If the reins-holder be blind and the horses be wild . . .

GANDHARI

Should you insult my Lord and liege? And before me? – who has prided herself as his slave and sweetheart?

KRISHNA

Then, what do you think was the reason? The royal blood is destined from birth to paint red the valorous sword and the reckless spear?

GANDHARI

Alas! Are valiant courage and dauntless blood meant only to clutch at each other's throats? Hand in hand what might they have not done to make *Bharathavarsha* another Indra's heaven? Oh, my darlings – must you all perish thus leaving me sicken with sorrow? How eagerly they rushed to the fight every morn crowned with my motherly blessings! Alas, what stony heart was this of mine that gave utterance only to 'Victory to the Righteous'. I have been no mother – woe me, could I not have saved my children?

KRISHNA

'Victory to the Righteous' – you chanted. That desire was fulfilled indeed – in thy slaughtered sons.

GANDHARI

Then, Krishna, is it me, the unholy seed of all this brood of sorrow and massacres? Woe me – their own doting dear mother! I sacrificed for my Lord . . but I did no penance for my offspring! . . A negligent mother . . .

KRISHNA

Mother, at last today . . .

GANDHARI

Yes, Krishna, I see it all clearly. The father was eyeless – was not then the mother's duty to be father as well unto the children?

But what did Gandhari do? She shut up her eyes and idled away the hours by the side of her husband holding his bare hands in love-clasp . . blind leading the blind! Thus I orphaned my babies. Is it wonder then that the flock went astray – the capricious sport and victims of every evil counsel? And captives of vaulting ambition fed on wily cunning?

KRISHNA

Yes, mother – all because the guardian angel, the mother, was not near to wean and plead and enfold and save.

GANDHARI

Alas! God gave me motherhood – I misused it. I disused it. I chose to be a mere wife!

KRISHNA

What a fatal choice, mother. And also – if the negligent mother breeds therefore wicked sons – her wifedom too . . .

GANDHARI

Her wifedom too gets stained and black, dost thou insinuate? But, Krishna, hark thou this . . The world shall think me still a faithful wife – peerless for love and loyalty . . Where is the bandage, my Lord, the eye-opener?

KRISHNA

Here is the soft silk, come mother, I will fasten it on as of old. Your eyes have indeed opened today – alas, to your horror. Seek peace again in your picturesque darkness.

(CURTAIN)