

Being Draupadi - Three Takes ...

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Introduction

The anthropology of religion claims that religions of pre-industrial peoples, or cultures in development, are called “myths”. The term “myth” at times also used in a derogatory sense by both religious and non-religious people. By defining another person’s religious stories and beliefs as mythology, it is meant that they are less real or true than one’s own religious stories and beliefs. Sociology, on the other hand, attributes a non-pejorative meaning to the term myth. It defines myth as a story that is important for the group unmindful of it being objectively or provably true. But from a mythological outlook, whether or not the event actually occurred is unimportant. Instead, the symbolism it carries is most significant. It remains a metaphor for the spiritual potentiality in the human being. Religious believers may or may not accept such symbolic interpretations. As per the current interpretations, a myth can be explained as a traditional story of historical events believed to have supposedly taken place in past. The story element serves to unfold contemporary society, perspectives of a people or explain a practice, belief or natural phenomenon. The character/s around whom the story has been weaved, then continues to embody certain ideology, practice or fate they represent.

An Indian has grown up on the stories of the great and grand epics of the land, *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata*. His parents and grand-parents must have preferred to present him in simplified and convincing tone. The supplementary reading books, the retold versions of these epics read in school days and the live characters shown on TV serials made on these stories make us believe them to be the real ones. But today the questions like – “Can these stories be real? Can such human beings with exceptional qualities and such extraordinary state of affairs exist? Is it possible to find out historic evidences?” - compel us to go back to them with newer rationale and renewed insight for them. Sita and Draupadi are the two of the strongest women in Indian mythology. Sita is the epitome of the traditionalism, whereas Draupadi is mutinous, for whom asking questions or raising doubts has been her second nature.

The recent rise observed in mythological fiction has provided the young generation with a generous and thoughtful literary creations. Many authors have been successful in handling mythological stories from various, more generous points of view and perspectives of a particular character. Among them are the immensely popular novels by three contemporary women novelists. They are:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Dr Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, and Kajal Oza Vaidya's *Draupadi*. All of them are the first person narratives of the dark, fire born enigmatic princess with flashing eyes – Draupadi. This character has been able to conjure contrasting emotions. The readers as well as the people around her are overwhelmed by her beauty. At times, they are almost shaken about her fate for having five husbands and they also spontaneously cry for her when she is insulted in the Kuru palace. Draupadi, the daughter in law of the Kuru clan and the wife of the great Pandavas can be called a distinguished personality, both for her loveliness and her granite will. Being volcanic, she becomes instrumental in reducing her enemies to the ashes and at the same time she is compassionate and generous. The story of this fiery princess bent on vengeance, is a saga of suffering. It is hard to judge her. She makes us raise our eyebrows as she unabashedly wanted the Kuru war. Hers is the character that possesses magnanimity of divine characters combined with ordinary human feelings and extra-ordinary suffering.

Being Draupadi

What is being Draupadi? Krishnaa, Panchali, Yajnasaini, Mahabharati, Sairandhari are the different names that she is known with. She is the 'emerged' daughter of King Drupada of Panchala and the wife of the five husbands, Kuru princes – the Pandavas. When Yudhisthira becomes the king of Hastinapura at the end of the war, Draupadi again becomes the queen of Indraprastha. She is the mother of five sons, Prativindhya, Sutasoma, Srutakirti, Satanika, and Srutakarma; one by each of her five husbands: The epic *The Mahabharata* presents her as an extraordinarily beautiful-undefeated by any woman of her time in terms of beauty; a woman of tremendous self-respect, a girl who is inquisitive unlike the young girls of her age, a lady who feels the wrong and has complaints for being wronged by others and her near and dear ones alike. Her asset is her best friend – Sakha Krishna, the complete and the most sought after man of Aryavarta. She is one of the Panch-Kanya (the five Virgins) of ancient Hindu Mythology along with her mother in law Kunti who too was gifted with the boon of virginity. She is born as an instrument to take revenge and to reestablish the rule of Dharma. She has guts to demand her rights in a male-dominated society, and fight injustice any which way she could. Draupadi is unabashedly and prominently a queen, with a woman's pride, a sharp intellect and a strong will.

There are seven facets of Draupadi's personae. The reality of her life and the essence of her existence rest on seven pillars:

1. Her birth is tragic and doomed for devastation. She is born unasked for from the sacrificial fire to bring about destruction.
2. She is forced into a polyandrous marriage by her in laws.
3. In spite of being a wife of five husbands, she is bereft of support from her husbands when she is dragged and re-robed in Kuru assembly.

4. She vows retaliation to the Kauravas.
5. She is devoted to Lord Krishna and her devotion borders love for him.
6. She nurtures soft corner for Arjuna who won her in the swayamvara.
7. She is forced to give priority to her dharma as a wife which resultantly overshadows her as a mother.

A. Born to destroy

Draupadi's birth, in form of an emergence, is an accidental bonus for Drupada who performed the rite for obtaining a son to avenge Drona. A heavenly announcement follows her birth that the lovely, dark lady would be the reason for the bloodiest wars in history, that the princess Draupadi will destroy all Kshatriyas. She is born, therefore, not to fulfill Drupada's purpose but that of the gods in response to the Earth's distressed prayer to lighten her burden of oppressive Kshatriyas. The gods further had meant her to marry the Pandavas and destroy the Kauravas.

B. Polyandrous Marriage

Princess Panchali, under the influence of Krishna, accepts the Brahmin youth who succeeds in the swayamvara test as her husband and also immediately follows him and his brothers to the forest where they lived with their mother. The wedding ceremony has been fixed after the meeting with the mother. As a result of Yudhisthira's comment of their 'bringing a rare jewel' and the mother's rejoinder to it 'to distribute equally among five brothers' result into a polyandrous situation by which she is expected to marry five men. The young princess, with the dreams of happy married life, though not in the palace, and no clarity whether the man is archer Arjuna, is confronted with the major issue of following the dharma. If she refuses the polyandry, then she defies her duty. For her, therefore, the assent remains the only alternative which is insulting and disgraceful. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage becomes an issue of concern for her and as the future course of action suggests a matter of derision for others.

Owing to her marriage to five husbands, Draupadi had to live with each one of them turn-by-turn for one year each. She had the boon to be born virgin every year, and is therefore called an eternal Kanya (a virgin).

Although polygamy was common among men of higher social ranks, in Indo-Aryan society, polyandry was not regarded without censure. Her marriage to five men was controversial. However, when questioned by Kunti to give an example of polyandry, Yudhisthira cites Gautam-clan Jatila (married to seven Saptarishis) and Hiranyaksha's sister Pracheti (married to ten brothers).

It has been a historic event and the author of the Mahabharata provides several reasons in its justification. In one of her previous births, as Nalayani, she had prayed to God for a husband with fourteen distinctive qualities. The God therefore managed for these qualities in five men (the Pandavas).

C. The Disrobing in the Assembly

The disrobing of the daughter-in-law of the Kuru clan in the assembly by her brothers-in-law and that too in presence of elder members of the family is the most unfortunate event of the Mahabharata. After losing the property and their individual selves in the game of dice when Yudhishthira pawns Draupadi and even loses that game, she is dragged into the court by Dushashana. Draupadi is ridiculed for being a wife of five men and Duryodhan orders to disrobe her in public. To Draupadi's question of what right do her husbands have to put at stake her after losing themselves in the game, the elders are devoid of proper reply. Neglecting the warnings of Gandhari, when Draupadi is actually disrobed, her husbands are helplessly seated with their heads down. So remain the other elders. Draupadi's earnest prayers are answered by her Sakha Krishna and she is saved of public disgrace. The incident leaves a scar in her heart and she vows revenge.

D. Burning Passion for Retaliation

The incident of dragging Draupadi clad in one piece of attire grabbing her hair turns out to be a key incident and is often considered to mark a definitive moment in the story of Mahâbhârata. It is one of the driving reasons that ultimately led to the Mahâbhârata war, though it cannot be considered the central or the most important one. The constant spiteful, unkind and upsetting comments, not only from the Kaurav princes, their wives and even from Karna, the constant lascivious moves of Duryodhana, the attempt of abduction by Jayadratha and the pinnacle of disgrace in form of the attempt of public disrobing – all made a righteous and a lady with self-respect a rebellious and vindictive personality surviving with the sole aim of revenge. The hate and revenge fuel Draupadi to such a great extent that she unabashedly wants retribution and nothing less than the Kuru war.

While Dushasana unwraps layers after layers of Draupadi's sari, her sari keeps getting extended. Out of the five Pandavas it is only Bhima who gets furious at Dushasana. He vows to tear open Dushasana's chest and drink his blood. The bitterness that festered at an insult and loss overpowers Draupadi so much that she realises nothing but revenge can satisfy her. She even takes an oath of keeping her hair untied till she has decorated it with the blood of Dushasana. Accordingly when Bheema kills Dushasana he brings a handful of Dushasana's blood and colours Draupadi's hair with it.

E. The Sakhi-Sakha relationship

The most exceptional feature of the Mahabharata, the saga of relationships is the association shared by Draupadi and Shri Krishna. Shri Krishna considers her his sakhi (friend) and for her, He is her sakha- always at her beck and call. As per the announcement made at the time of her birth that the most beautiful Draupadi will be won in marriage by the most worthy man of Aryavart, Draupadi begins dreaming for Krishna. It is Krishna who explains her that Arjuna being a portion of his entity, is meant for her. He further establishes the magnanimity of the unique relationship that he shares with her which is beyond the earthly and societal norms. Draupadi's liking for Arjuna can be explained as his being the replica of Krishna. The story of the Mahabharata is replete with incidents where Draupadi, in testing times, just remembers her sakha and Shri Krishna appears in person to guide or help her, whether it is the dilemma of preserving Dharma in the case of polyandry or the public disrobing in the forum.

Draupadi is an exemplification of Bhakti, and she experienced God's divine presence constantly in her life. Before the attempt of pact between Pandavas and Kauravas when she questioned Krishna about everything that had happened to her, He reassures her: "Soon wilt thou, O Draupadi, behold the ladies of Bharata's race weep as thou dost. Even they, O timid one, will weep like thee, their kinsmen and friends being slain...Stop thy tears, I swear to thee, O Draupadi, soon wilt thou see thy husbands, with their enemies slain, and with prosperity crowning them."

F. Partiality for Arjuna

Once, though reluctantly, Draupadi accepts polyandry, she remains faithful to the Pandavas and loved her five husbands alike, from the depth of her heart. The fact, although even she accepts, is her partiality for Arjuna in whom she could find Shri Krishna and also that it is he who has outperformed everyone to win her hand in the swayamvara. She does not cry out in protest for him even though he did so as a poor Brahmin. She does not turn him away as she does in case of Karna. Though being a princess, and ignorant of their real identity as the Pandavas, she even goes with the five brothers on foot to their humble hut. The independent, brave and outspoken Draupadi does not argue in the name of Dharma and marries the five brothers, the sons of Kunti who could not disobey their mother's words. During their final journey to heaven, Draupadi is the first to fall on the way. The reason for the fall of Draupadi is quoted as she being more partial towards Arjuna than the rest of her husbands.

G. Draupadi- a woman and her Dharma

History records that the war of Kurukshetra, the clash of the mighty Kauravas and invincible Pandavas takes place because of a woman named Draupadi. She has never been just an

ornamental wife to the five brothers. A princess by bearing and birth, she proves herself to be an ideal wife and a woman who takes it upon her the hardships and tribulations that come with her place in the Kuru clan. Immediately after the swayamvara she steps out on foot with her husband and his five brothers. Every time in exile and during the state of disguise, she faces ordeals in various forms without a single complaint. None of Draupadi's children survive at the end of the epic. Duryodhana sent his men during the great battle at Kurukshetra to torch the camping tents of the Pandavas at night. But his men got confused with the Upapandavas (sons of Draupadi and pandavas) as they looked very similar to their fathers. So instead of torching the camps of the Pandavas, the men end up torching the camps of Draupadi's children. Parikshita, grandson of Subhadra and Arjuna, is the sole Pandava descendent who survives. Till the end, her role as a wife goes on getting priority over that of a mother.

THREE NOVELS

The woman character of the epic the Mahabharata, 'Draupadi' has attracted all the womanist writers to judge it with a new approach and a new angle. All the three novels delineate a male-centric story with their focus turned around. They are the stories of the central female protagonist Draupadi living in a man's world, around whom magical tales of love and passion, honour and humiliation, power and weaknesses are weaved.

A. Palace of Illusions

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, aka Chitralkha Banerjee is an Indian English writer, whose works represent an immense amount of understanding and sympathy for South Asian women. 'The Palace of Illusions' published in 2008, speaks of the great Indian epic, Mahabharata, through the eyes of Draupadi. The Mahabharata tells us of the war that was caused by an insult to one woman and her thirsting need for revenge. What remains untold is what went through Draupadi's mind during all these moments and events that altered history. The Palace of Illusions explores all facets of Draupadi's life, including her part in her husbands' quest to regain their birth right, her complex friendship with Krishna, and her mysterious attraction towards Karna. Unlike other typical females, she is interested in the art of war and the intricacies of ruling a kingdom. Divakaruni's Draupadi has many weaknesses. She is haughty, short tempered and at times manipulative. The character of Draupadi has been commonly viewed as a vampish character that remains the cause of the Great War. But Divakaruni weaves her plot and words in a masterly fashion that the readers are forced to empathize with her protagonist Draupadi and offer her their compassion. The Draupadi that she presents is a strong-willed person with a never-say-die attitude. She always seemed to have a plan for everything and possess a willingness to take upon all roles that came her way; be it forcing her father to let her study with her brother, living in

the exile, serving as a maid to another queen, trying to be the only wife to her five husbands, maintaining a cordial relationship with her mother-in-law Kunti or trying to rebuild the city of Hastinapur after the war. Divakaruni chooses to use the selected incidents from the great epic and only glosses over them from her perspective. The book is more about what Draupadi feels than details of what happens in the Mahabharata. Draupadi's voice is clear, poignant and heart-wrenching at the same time. The novel describes Draupadi's relations and concerns for four Ks – Kiriti (Arjuna), Krishna, Kunti and Karna.

In case of Kiriti (Arjun), Draupadi is not able to fulfill even the routine conjugal bliss and satisfaction from life that any common woman longs for and enjoys. He is the one who wins the princess Panchali in the swayamvar. As a result Draupadi's soft feeling for him is understood; though the original story of Mahabharat suggests his several marriages wherever he went. The relationship between Kunti and Draupadi is quite peculiar. The image of Kunti presented by Divakaruni is that of a mother who is careful about the fact that she has not to lose her sons to a wife. The unity among her five sons is essentially inevitable to fight against the unjust Kauravas. At the same time her cautiousness is seen in her so called innocent asking for 'dividing the alms equally among five brothers' and thus forcing Draupadi into polyandry, so that her daughter-in-law cannot raise any query regarding the births of her sons in form of boons. Every move that is made, from the statement that causes Draupadi to be wife to five to the tough circumstances Kunti faces and triumphs, shows that they hated each other's guts and character. With Krishna, Draupadi is more at a receiving end; voluntarily and also due to the awe and admiration that his personality has always demanded. Krishna remains her guide and mentor in the complete course of her life. The most striking feature of the novel, the take that is taken by Divakaruni is Draupadi's attraction for Karna. This is not clearly found in Vyasa's rendition. On the occasion of swayamvara, under the influence of Krishna and her dear brother Dri –Dhrustadhyumna, Draupadi rejects Karna. She insults and disqualifies him for being the son of a charioteer. Later, when she realizes his ability and credential, she feels guilty about it and unknowingly develops silent attraction for him. She again harbors guilt for the fact that Karna is her husbands' most dangerous enemy. This causes her to live with regret. Eventually the knowledge that vindictiveness of Karna is because of her rejection at the swayamvara where she found her husband, constantly torments her.

In an interview Divakaruni confesses that for her, Draupadi 'is the epitome of a timeless woman. I spent quite a lot of time thinking about her; I tried to get in to her mind.' In reply to a question regarding the novel exploring a complex relationship between Draupadi and Karna, Divakaruni explains, 'Vyasa himself hints about the existence of such an attraction. It is clear that Karna is attracted to her, after all he wanted to marry her earlier in the epic. In fact the original talks about a scene where Kunti invites Karna over to her place and tells him to switch sides, she then tells him that he could marry Draupadi as well, if he did cross

over to the Pandavas. What I did was talk about it from Draupadi's perspective. I imagined that she would feel strongly about this. I have gotten pretty good feedback and I am really appreciative of that.'

B. Yajnaseni – The Story of Draupadi

Pratibha Ray has a great passion for revealing the underlying mysteries of the society. Her romanticism lies in realistic angle of life. Her novel Yajnaseni –The Story of Draupadi won her Bhartiya Jananapith's prestigious ninth Moortidevi award. Ray has an innate ability to examine and present women consciousness through the protagonist in a very natural way. Her women consciousness is intense but decisively not so aggressive. She would observe keenly from all different sources, feel the burning of the coal herself, and the age-old burning problems of women would erupt with realistic imagination in her novels.

Yajnaseni -The Story of Draupadi is Pratibha Ray's version of Mahabharata in the perspective of Draupadi presented with a feminist attitude where the author tries to justify her actions by covering up all her burdens. She makes a determined effort for portraying the epic character in order to bring to the surface the broader and deeper aspects of Draupadi's mind that have been laid inundated in the majestic surge of the marvelous Mahabharata. The novel is written in the flashback technique where the fallen Draupadi thinks of Krishna and drops a letter for him to read. It is in form of a complaint on the justice denied by the world. Draupadi not only remains anchored in the epic but also rises out of its pages to become contemporary and extremely relevant modern womanist figure of our time. There are several instances where Draupadi argues in feministic fashion. The best example is that of her swayamvara. She feels herself to be an object of display. She feels profoundly ashamed to be the target of so many lustful eyes. While appearing before the invited warriors she thinks, "I would be on display before all. My beauty and radiance would spur the competitors on." (Y-39). She is unable to bear silently the agony by burning up within. She has already been silently affianced and betrothed with Arjuna-the third Pandava, being 'a portion of Krishna himself'. But she feels insecure thinking, "If someone other than Arjuna succeeds in the test due to her father's relaxations, how can I taint my soul by wedding that person?" (Y-33) When a Brahmin youth, on Krishna's recommendation, succeeds the swayamvara test, she is made to accept him in the name of her father's dharma that a daughter has to follow. At that time she decides that whosoever the Brahmin youth may be, for her he would be her Arjuna. The same Draupadi feels annoyed when she is termed as 'a priceless thing'. When after marriage she reaches the potter's hut in the Ekchakra forest with her husband and his four brothers, Yudhisthira the eldest brother announces to their mother that they have brought a priceless object and as reply to it their mother advises 'to divide amongst the five equally'. Now the dharma of a wife compels her to a polyandrous

marriage. (Y-55, 56) Draupadi's mind rebels, but she remains silent thinking the man who has proved his ability in the swayamvara would protest. Instead the words- "We shall all enjoy the princess equally, she will be the wife according to dharma, of us all" (Y-57) ignite Draupadi but again she burns in inner anguish. Even Krishna's argument of polyandry being an access to unity among brothers makes her ask, "Was this truth or self-deception". (Y-69) Although she accepts to be a wife of five husbands, the realization that as an ideal Indian wife, it is only her duty to take care of all but there is no one to take care of her, torments her a lot. Once when she is unwell and longs for the healing touch of her husbands, she is handed over to the treatment of the royal physician. Draupadi, at that time, reflects that with considerable faith in the royal physician, she has lost faith in herself and her husbands. The novel suggests Arjuna's frustration getting manifested in a different way. When she is with Yudhishthira, Arjuna deliberately enters the palace with the pretext of getting his weapons. As per the settlement among the five brothers, when Draupadi is with one, the others are not expected to visit the couple's palace. Arjuna, thus as an outrage, invites the punishment of twelve years of distance from Draupadi. For a wife constantly awaiting togetherness with the man of her love it is more than being doomed. Thus this relation is not devoid of the grey shade.

C. Draupadi

Kajai Oza Vaidya is a well-known Gujarati novelist of intent emotions. She has presented her interpretations of both the protagonists of Mahabharata in form of novels, the male protagonist Krishna, as the story of the Deity who lived the life of a human being and also the female protagonist Draupadi, as the story of a woman in quest of her identity. Her Draupadi, along with possessing an illuminating and finely faceted, rare, gemlike personality, is inherently a woman with tender and warm emotions. She is highly intelligent nurturing in her the burning fiery passion for revenge and at the same time a gentle lady allowing her heart to dominate her mind. The life of Draupadi, as depicted in the Mahabharata has been challenging and stranger than fiction. Born unasked for from the sacrificial fire, in which her father invokes a son to help him defeat his archenemy Drona, she is named Krishnaa, or the 'dark-skinned one'. The very first complaint that she has is that because she has been an unwanted gift, her parents have not been enthusiastic even in naming her. Her twin brother is given a fine name-Dristadyumna whereas she is named as Draupadi (Drupad's daughter) or Panchali (daughter of the king of Panchal).

Vaidya establishes the fact that it is the rule of this world that in order to keep her distinct and inborn traits intact, any intellectual, beautiful and talented female has to struggle with her own near and dear ones as well as the strangers. In any age, society has never allowed freedom to any lady to interrogate and inquire; and even if she dares to do then her strife and the resultant suffering has been of the worst type. Draupadi's sensitivity and sensibility

are the outcome of her suffering. A woman is an incarnation of endurance. She is, by nature, faithful and tolerant as these two qualities of hers give her security and satisfaction. When she is tortured and anguished beyond herself, she grows rebellious. The defiance of a chaste woman forces change in the society.

Vaidya's Draupadi is confronting her own 'Question Bank– Prashnopanishada'. Questions coercing judicious replies involuntarily arise in her mind adding to her troubles. Her being interrogative becomes a matter of constant annoyance for the persons around her but she just cannot resist. Being born a fully developed woman, she has very little notion of 'childhood' and 'innocence', and her naive concepts are soon shattered when she is thrown headlong into the brewing political brawl between the Drupads and the Kurus. Vaidya writes, "The ideal time for a person is his childhood. Passions and love rule then. Simplicity, laughter and tears are the qualities of childhood. Forgiveness, friendship and compassion are its assets. But I am born young. Why only am I kept devoid of the bliss of girlhood? Those innocent games of dolls and puppets, those swings and flowing laughter – unfortunately I never got to experience anything." (D – 18-19) (Translation)

Draupadi's life, like her birth, was pre-ordained to move in one direction only i.e. the destruction of the Kurus. This is further reiterated numerous times, by Draupadi herself and by those around her. Draupadi therefore, develops into a fatalist individual, and often she has a question, "Why is it that Fate always mock at me while I enjoy the fleeting moments of happiness and even at times I tend to forget about the destiny...". To this Dwaipayan Ved Vyas replies, "O loving daughter you are born ahead of time. The forthcoming centuries will talk about you and remember you for long. You will get the best Destiny can ever offer but you won't be able to enjoy it. You will be tried every moment. I am sure you will come out successfully from all the testing times but at the same time you will never be able to forget the scars, they will permanently torment you". (D – 45) (Translation)

While being dragged in the court by Dushasana, the Draupadi, who, in the name of Dharma continues to serve her five husbands with utmost devotion and that too without asking any question, displays her grit and asks whether her husbands lost themselves first of her and if they lost themselves first then what right do they have to put their wife to stake? It is her firmness of mind and spirit, her unyielding courage in the face of hardship and danger that provide her mettle to pose a question before the elders of the clan. She further has a query that when her mother-in-law, a woman herself, orders polyandry for her then how could they tolerate the address of 'a prostitute' by Karna in the assembly? Why anyone didn't come to her rescue?

Conclusion

Draupadi's story is known to almost everyone born in India or who has read the great epic – the Mahabharata. What is not familiar is how she felt about the various choices that were made for her; by her father, her brother, her mother-in-law, her husbands, even by Lord Krishna, who she was devoted to. Draupadi remains a symbol of Indian woman. A character culturalized to represent chastity, a role-model created by male chauvinism to showcase how they want their women to be; pure, law-abiding, beholder or their honor, personification of beauty and sacrifice. Draupadi has been a multifaceted personality: she could be fiery and angry when the situation called for it, but she still had a compassionate nature. She encouraged people to face life with the same inner strength that she did. After the war, Draupadi looks after Gandhari with respect and affection, even though Gandhari's sons had wronged her in all possible ways. She possesses all the potentials of the mythical character that very much like the boon (?) going with character repeatedly regains virginity and enables creative writers to work upon various aspects.

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