

Survival and Freedom: Challenges in Representation of a Woman in a Man's World Through the Character of Draupadi from *The Mahabharata*

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Abstract

*Women have been written in stories and depicted in the tales and epics in the past which have been written primarily by men. Therefore, the representation of women alters from reality. Considered as the great epic, Vyasa's *The Mahabharata* revolves around two groups of cousins, Kauravas and Pandavas who go through series of experiences leading to the Kurukshetra war. However, Draupadi, the only prominent female character and married to the Pandavas is considered as the cause of this war.*

*This paper will look at the representation of women in a patriarchal setup especially through the character of Draupadi. She needed saving from Krishna, needed her husbands to avenge her dishonour and after all this, she still faced backlash. Time and again, the woman is stripped of her agency, and then passed onto the male in her life who then determines her fate. Through the lens of Postmodern Feminism and through Mahasweta Devi's short story, *Draupadi*, this paper will look at this fierce woman from the timeless epic that helps challenge the existence of a woman in a man's world.*

Keywords: *Patriarchy, Representation in epics, Dishonour, Postmodern Feminism, Draupadi, Gender performativity*

Introduction

...The war was due to a woman and her coveted beauty

The war was due to her revenge, which they felt was their duty

Strange are the reasons, stranger are the prejudices

The blame lies with me, while they are remembered for their virtues!!... (Das 224)

The epics produced are influential and followed as a guide to living life in India. Epics and mythologies play a core role in perpetuating the culture of the time period. There have been many Indian epics which are read and reread even in the modern 21st century. *The Mahabharata, Ramayana, Upanishads* are stories that allow a richer understanding of the Indian culture. Women are represented in these works of art or epics in a rather

complex way. They are not one-dimensional characters. There are layers to their personalities which speak to the lushness of the stories produced in India. The character of Sita chooses to die rather than convince the society and her husband, Lord Ram, time and again of her loyalty and fidelity. Draupadi is considered the cause of the Kurukshetra war and yet she is referred to as Panchali, the wife of the strong and the great Pandavas.

Women characters like the Panchakanyas – Ahilya, Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari are considered the five iconic women of the Hindu epics. It is believed that calling upon their names drives the person away from sin as they are pure and ideal examples of women. The term 'kanya' can be translated as 'virgin'. The fascination for the concept of 'purity' was applied to all the Panchakanya seven after they were married and thereby the concept of 'purity' applied to the society. These are all women who were married and lived domestic lives but the fascination for the concept of 'purity' carried forward even after their marriages. For example, Sita had to prove her 'purity' through the ordeal of fire. This helps bring us to the idea of the personality of a woman being categorized into binaries- 'The Angel' or 'The Wretched'. The possibility of a

woman being far away from these categories was not being explored both in the literal sense and as a society. However, an epic like *The Mahabharata* has provided varied women characters with diverse personalities. This cannot be considered a win in totality because, though the women characters are not one dimensional, they lack the agency to showcase their complexity. This paper aims to look at the character of Draupadi keeping in mind the complexity of her character and then to look through the lens of Postmodern Feminism in a patriarchal setup. This has been achieved by comparing the famed character from the epic with the protagonist from Mahasweta Devi's short story, *Draupadi*.

The female characters being shoved into boxes for “better understanding of women” is a way to ensure political disempowerment for women. The rules and regulations of the society which are followed as part of the culture remain so without being questioned. The conception of a patriarchal society leans on to the ideology of power differences. Though the concept of 'Hegemony' by Antonio Gramsci discusses class differences, the concept of dominance of one group over other makes the idea even clearer. The women mentioned in the stories and epics in India show

these complex and strong characters who still follow the path of obedience and subservience. The characters of Kunti, Sita and Draupadi are all powerful women who have taken their roles as 'mother', 'daughter', 'wife' very seriously. They follow the path of subservience with tiny amounts of rebellion that shakes up the calmness of the narrative. For example, Draupadi questions the misconduct performed on her as she is being dragged by Dushshasan, she questions the notions she is unaware of and she is appreciated for her beauty and her intelligence. The variation in her personality still results to moving towards this point of the amount of freedom she has that allows her to survive and lead her life. According to Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* mentions, "... "humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself," and by all the qualities she is presumed to lack." (11). The representation for women characters from Indian epics are now coming up and trying to replace the misrepresentation of what it is to be a 'woman' from different walks of life. In the recent times, shifted perspectives and voices given to the under-represented or misrepresented female characters in the epics can be seen in *Karna's Wife* by Kavita Kane, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakurni, *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray

and many more. The women characters mentioned in this paper are very few and not a declaration of all women characters in these epics.

The Mahabharat has been called an epic and it lives up to that name in every which way. One has grown up reading and watching and consuming the stories from *The Mahabharata* in different versions. *Amar Chitra Katha* gave us insight into stories in condensed versions. Stories of Krishna helping the *Pandavas* and stories of *Bheem's* strength along with Draupadi's Swayamvar. The latest trend surrounding this great epic is the retelling of the story through characters which were either misrepresented or not given enough of a voice to tell their story. Karna, Draupadi, Duryodhana and many others have their versions of story told by writers. The representation is interesting because the story of *The Mahabharat* is in itself a mythology. *The Mahabharata*, an epic, is considered to be one of the greatest stories every told. The Hindu eras are divided into 'Satya Yuga', 'Treta Yuga', 'Dvapara Yuga' and 'Kali Yuga'. The events of *The Mahabharata* occurred in the 'Dvapara Yuga' (Debroy 20).

Composed thousands of years ago, the original version has undergone changes through the test of time. In the initial time period, this story was passed on through oral transmission,

the way the story was being told and how it was being interpreted by the people listening to it made all the difference. However, there are certain similarities in different versions that have survived. This paper has taken the versions of *The Mahabharata* by C. Rajagopalachari and Bibek Debroy to gain a deeper understanding of the text of *The Mahabharata*. Both these versions depict scenes from the story in different perspectives which helped to gain a wider understanding of the epic and the world of *The Mahabharata*. While C. Rajagopalachari maintains a very 'as is' depiction, Debroy has managed to present a more layered version in terms of characters from the epic.

While, there is no shame asking for help, the character of *Draupadi* from *Mahabharat* and her identity revolves around the men in her life. Draupadi, the daughter of King of Drupad is a very interesting character in the story. She is remembered for two things- being the wife of Pandavas and someone who was considered the reason for the Kurukshetra war. There are two things that one must consider when we look at the latter point. If a person/woman had that much power to unfold things according to her whim, why was she never the person committing the actions and secondly, is it ever fair to place the entire responsibility of the war onto the

shoulders of one person? By taking a more ascending approach and with the help of *Écriture féminine*, the readers in today's times learn of 'writing women'. The depiction should not be what one wants it to be but rather the reality as is it is incredibly narrow minded to limit the idea of being a woman to one notion.

Stories are an extension of the reality and the common consensus in the way women were treated and written and created in stories are reflective of the time. Elaine Showalter describes the three phases of women's writing- The "feminine" (women writers imitating men), "feminist" (protesting and fighting for women's rights) and the "female" phase (women's texts and women are in focus) allows the writer and reader to navigate the pathway of women being written. (Guerin et al. 268). Through the perspective of "female phase" as discussed by Showalter, it can be understood that women in the society are very different to the ones written in these epics. The epics have a version of 'ideal' woman that is aspirational and desirable whereas the postmodern feminist version of a woman is subjective and cannot be assumed in one definition. Gender being performative as mentioned by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) is a continuous action that is undertaken by

the individual in the society which gets obstructed when the society places gender into boxes (Meyerhoff2).

The character of Draupadi has lack of agency at times even in the language used to describe her. The Pandavas “won” her at 'Swayamvara' (a misleading ritual of the woman “choosing” her groom when in fact, the decision is made by a series of competitions which leads to “winning” the bride), her identity being restricted to being the Pandavas' wife, her sons' mother, the daughter-in-law of Kunti, her father's daughter, her brother's sister.

This lack of agency is also seen in her identity as her beauty is referenced when she is mentioned in the text. This is seen as a quality that she is most known for disregarding her intelligence as secondary. For example, the first time she is described in the text, she is described through her beauty and her relation with her “powerful” brother.

...A great ceremony, with wonderful events, will take place there. The great-souled Yajnasena Drupada obtained a daughter from the middle of the sacrificial altar and her eyes are like lotus petals, with unblemished features and beauty, youth and intelligence. She is the sister of the powerful Dhrishtadyumna... (Debroy 205).

Mahasweta Devi, a writer representing the voices of tribals provides an insight into the life of a tribal woman who is named Draupadi. She presents themes of repression by State, issues with regards to gender and what that intersectionality derives from this protagonist. The short story *Draupadi* appeared in 'Womb of Fires', a collection of her short stories. Devi imagines a version of story inspired from the epic with a twist of feminist interpretation. Draupadi is a naxal, tribal woman who is captured by the government officials who further assault and rape her. She wakes up to find her tired, weary, bloodied body wherein she is now afraid of nothing as she has got nothing to lose. Turning her perpetrators to be afraid of her fearless nature is a stark contrast to the representation of Draupadi from *The Mahabharata*. The 'Vastraharan' which is by and large a contested incident in the epic but exists in almost all versions of the epic, shows the character of Draupadi being dragged to the hall after she is 'lost' by her husbands in a game of dice and she is publicly disrobed as punishment. However, by divine intervention, Krishna saves her as she asks for his help. On the other hand, Draupadi from Devi's short story has no one to call upon for help and she takes charge of her own destiny. This is how Devi provides agency to her Draupadi.

...Draupadi comes closer. Stands with her hand on her hip, laughs and says, The object of your search, Dopsi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?

Where are her clothes?

Won't put them on, sir. Tearing them.

Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Devi 402).

The rape of Draupadi in Devi's short story is a tool used upon her to disempower her and render her agency to be nullified. But the later part of the story where Draupadi exacts revenge on the ones who inflicted torture upon her shows Devi's notion of inverting the entire system of blaming and shaming the victim by providing her to taking control of the life following the unfortunate series of incidents. *The*

Mahabharata's Draupadi vowed to take revenge for the dishonour caused to her which was fulfilled by her husbands. Both these examples mentioned in the life of Draupadi from *The Mahabharata* shows that while the character of Draupadi is layered as she does not sit quiet over humiliation, she herself is not given any active agency but passes on the agency to her husbands and Krishna.

In the book of critical theories by Guerin et al., Helen Vendler criticizes feminism's political biases and mentions that "...if feminism is to succeed it must de-idealize women" (268). The character of Draupadi from the epic *The Mahabharata* is denied agency and the paper tried to understand this patriarchal setup that traditional societies engulf themselves in by deconstructing through postmodern feminist lens. The agency that was lacking is again a reflection of the society which has come a long way since the narrative of the epic *The Mahabharata* by Vyasa was created still has a long way to go when it comes to the representation of women in both literature and real life.

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