

THE 'HUMANITY' OF THE GODDESS: A STUDY OF THE CONTEMPORARY FACE OF DRAUPADI

ROSHNI

Assistant Professor
Aryabhata College,
University of Delhi

Abstract

The charismatic and multi-faceted aura of Draupadi, the chief heroine of Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata has intrigued and inspired authors for decades now. While the influence of mythology on literature is not new, experimentations within the existing forms in terms of style, language and ideology deserve our critical attention.

This study will investigate Trisha Das's The Mahabharata Re-imagined, a work of contemporary popular fiction to analyse and understand the significance of literature towards making mythology more 'palatable' to the modern Indian sensibility by mediating the temporal, spatial and ideological differences by focussing on the representation of Draupadi. The feminist representation of Draupadi in Das's text certainly makes her more 'human' than her epic counterpart thus involving a transition from the sacred to the secular.

However, Das's tremendously eclectic selection of episodes from the epic fails to recapture the radiance of Draupadi. Therefore, one feels wary of investing too much in such works which fall short of finding a consistent voice and thus may hardly afford an alternative reading of the epic.

Keywords: *mythology, popular fiction, contemporary, sacred, secular, humanity, voice.*

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The charismatic and multi-faceted aura of Draupadi, the chief heroine of Veda Vyasa's Mahabharata has intrigued and inspired authors for decades now. Typically described as the epitome of womanhood in the epic, she is also represented as the nemesis of the Kshatriyas.

Dichotomies are reconciled in her person. While she is immaculate as the fire, her disguise as Sairandhri (hairdresser or chambermaid) during the incognito period of her forest exile with her husbands 'involves references to shudra and outcaste roles, associations with extreme impurity and evocations of the goddess in her destructive forms: Mrityu, Kali, Kalaratri, Durga', argues Alf Hildebeitel in his article, 'Śiva, the Goddess, and the Disguises of the Pandavas and Draupadi'(153). This is significant since the Epic identifies her as the 'auspicious goddess Sri Lakshmi'. Her disguise thus 'reveals her to be an embodiment not only of Sri Lakshmi but of the Hindu Goddess in her totality'. (ibid.)

Interestingly Draupadi is not just the chief heroine of the great epic, she is also 'a goddess connected with the rural market town of Gingee (Tamil Cenci)...once the home of kings', explains Alf Hildebeitel, in his book *The Cult of Draupadi, Volume I* (3). According to him, the cult consolidated between the late thirteenth and the end of the fourteenth century (probably early fourteenth century) in the region of Gingee (South Arcot District, Tamil Nadu). Draupadi festivals are celebrated where dramatists sing praises to the Goddess who bears a parrot on a closed lotus bud in her right hand and sports loosened hair in her processional icon. Being the mount of Kama Deva, the god of eroticism, parrot underscores the feminine aspect of the Goddess.

While the epic and the cults tend to idealise Draupadi the Indian contemporary popular fiction reflects a change in one's perception of the mythological. This study will investigate Trisha Das's *The Mahabharata Re-imagined: A Collection of Scenes from the Epic*, published in 2009, a work of contemporary popular fiction to analyse and understand the significance of literature towards making mythology more 'palatable' to the modern Indian sensibility by mediating the temporal, spatial and ideological differences by focusing on the representation of Draupadi.

Unlike the epic and the cult, Das focusses on the 'humanity' of Draupadi in her text. The first page presents a vividly sensual description of her getting primed for her swayamavara ceremony. The inability of the princess to hold still which in turn smudges her kohl underscores her anxiety as she stands at the threshold of her future represented by the swayamavara hall. Her nervousness manifests in the 'quiver of her lips and incessant blink of her eye'(1) and indicates her vulnerability as a human.

Even as Das's description of Draupadi traces the generic lines, her uniqueness is pointed out:

'She was dark in complexion, unlike most royal women. Her head was held high, also unlike most women, who lowered their gaze under the scrutiny of men. Her beauty was not usual, full lips and high cheekbones belied the traditional. But, oh yes, she was beautiful.' (5)

She is 'unlike' most women – royal or otherwise which may also be regarded as an indication to the fact that her destiny will be unique, her polyandrous marriage being a case in point. Her intriguing beauty enralls everyone from the womenfolk in her kingdom to the guards to the princes and kings who appear for the swayamavara.

The alluring description of Draupadi's beauty in Das's text reminds one of Krishna Vasudeva's word from the epic where he declares that only a non-male, 'kliba' or 'jada' would be able to resist her beauty. Any man in her vicinity is thus instinctively filled with

desire for her so much so that battle lines are drawn. For instance, the kings at her swayamvara almost spontaneously become hostile to each other. The Pandavas too, are naturally enthralled by her and therefore despite Arjuna's victory at the swayamavara, Kunti therefore declares her the common wife to them in order to ensure unity among her sons.

Another aspect of Draupadi's uniqueness in the epic is evident from the manner of her 'birth'- she emerges from the sacrificial fire and is thus referred to as ayonija, not born from a womb, a fact shared by several male heroic figures like Drona, Kripa, etc. However, unlike the heroes, she is also born without a father. A wombless birth was often associated with great inner strength and purity. Das's text makes no reference to the divine birth of Draupadi. Her Draupadi is an earthly princess who heroically accepts her fate.

In her swayamavara, she has been presented as a challenge. She represents an 'intensity, a latent force not unlike the stiff, giant bow that rested at the centre of the amphitheatre'(5). The guards are almost intimidated by her. Draupadi's comparison with bow associates her with Arjuna, the famous Gandiva-wielder, who 'held himself like a stretched catapult' during the swayamavara (11). This comparison obviously suggests the affinity between them which is furthered by their shared physical features. Given that bow is a weapon of battle/war, it also highlights the kshatriya lineage of Draupadi. Like Arjuna she represents elastic potential energy waiting to be realized in the battle which also reminds the reader of the epic where her emergence from the yajna fire is accompanied by an akashvani, or a bodiless declaration from the skies stating that she will be the destruction of the kshatriyas.

The epic speaks of her polyandrous marriage as a result of Shiva's boon. Her eagerness for a husband makes her repeat her request five times. The cults emphasize her maternal aspects. Other than Arjuna, the Pandavas mostly appear as her devotees. Das, on the other hand, explores the trauma of Draupadi who faints at the idea of polyandry. When she comes back to her senses she almost instinctively races 'pagan-like' towards the guest

chambers to plead with Kunti. The deliberate use of the word 'pagan' indicates her desperate state of disarray and contrasts with her status as a princess.

It must be pointed out that Das is not the only author who questions Draupadi's polyandrous marriage with the Pandavas. Iravati Karve's Marathi book *Yuganta* offers a poignant description of Draupadi who remained a scapegoat all her life and suffers betrayal not just by her husbands but also Krishna elicits readers' sympathy. Pratibha Ray's Oriya novel *Yajnaseni*, represents Draupadi as a tragic figure who knows that by committing herself to polyandry she will become susceptible to different kinds of criticisms in the future and wonders if the world would sympathise with her plight. By divesting the Mahabharata of divine intervention, S.L. Bhyrappa's Kannada novel *Parva* presents a poignant picture of reeling under the sexual abuse of polyandry. Yarlagadda Lakshmi Prasad's Telugu novel *Draupadi* explores the psychological state of a Draupadi caught in a polyandrous marriage in a society which equates such women with prostitutes.

Though inspired by her predecessors, Das's re-examination of Draupadi's marriage assumes the form of a dialogue between Kunti and Draupadi. in the women's quarters of Drupad's palace. Men are only spoken of during this discussion and do not appear on the scene. Draupadi's appearance when she meets Kunti replicates her state of turmoil - her saree looks 'askew, her hair wild and loose, her eyes swollen and red, with streams of black kohl running down her cheeks' (51-52). Kunti's initial response to her is coldly formal. 'She smiled slightly but no compassion reached her eyes as she beheld the distraught Draupadi, who stood near the door'(53).

Draupadi's desperate plea for intervention is callously dismissed by Kunti who asks her to 'speak in a manner befitting your [her] station'(ibid). While it is easy to dismiss it as the shallowness of a hypocritical society that privileges appearances over reality, this insistence on behaving with dignity in the face of crisis is certainly a reminder of her socio-political position and a subtle indication that she must know how to use her power. Chitra Banerjee's *Palace of Illusions* makes a similar reference when Draupadi realizes that a woman's power is subtle rather than obvious.

In her text, Das juxtaposes Kunti and Draupadi – princesses who had ‘known’ more than one men. However unlike Draupadi Kunti never made her emotions public.

‘Princess Kunti was the very embodiment of a royal. Dignified and graceful. Silent...Frail and of unexceptional complexion, her plain face was defined by that look of helplessness, of dependency, that fired the protective hearts and tyrannical wills of men. It was her only claim to womanly beauty and she cultivated it well.’ (67)

The equivocation by the author cannot be missed. Kunti’s beauty which contrasts with the physical beauty of Draupadi makes her powerful and impermeable. She is acutely aware of her position in the patriarchal social set up and therefore understands the significance of obedience (or at least keeps a pretense of the same). She knows that defiance is luxury women cannot afford. She therefore tries to make the best of the options available to her. Her decisions foreground the complexity of power struggle for women.

She tells Draupadi that a princess’s life is controlled by her father and in order to retain her status she must never displease him. Her abandonment of Karna, becomes a consequence of the same. This ‘wisdom’ of Kunti derives from her experience as a young girl who was married ‘to a sickly, impotent man who loved another’ and made her act outside their marriage in order to have sons (62). While she had no choice in the matter, she realized that her survival after the “almost certain death” of her husband entailed the birth of her sons. She thrived because she could look beyond the immediate patch of suffering.

Draupadi’s argument that ‘dharma is unforgiving of women’ and therefore any ‘unusual act by a woman can be misunderstood by men’ and may even be referred to as ‘adharmic by the judgmental’ is dismissed by Kunti in favour of a political alliance between King Drupada and her sons. She adds that Drupada’s desire to be allied with the Pandavas buffered with his substantial military and economic power will ensure the sanction of the

priests. This arrangement also ensures unity among the Padavas. Draupadi is but a commodity to be exchanged with the wedding vows and hence her consent to this match is not necessary. Draupadi's fear is realized when Duryodhana later refers to her as a prostitute, an adharmic woman. It must be noted that while Draupadi's rejection of polyandry is based on personal and social lines, Kunti is motivated by her political ambition which involve fair share of strategy and manipulation.

Another point to be considered is that despite precedents like Jatila who married seven sages and Matisha who married ten Pracheta brothers to provide a dharmic justification of polyandry, the Mahabharata has an ambiguous position with reference to patriarchy. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage is condemned by Duryodhana and Karna in the dicing hall at Hastinapura.

In Das's text a baffled Draupadi compares polyandry with prostitution. Kunti bluntly states that a princess is actually no different from a prostitute and hence she must prove her utility as mother to the future king and as a 'political pawn' (62). A shocked Draupadi feels dehumanized, like she was 'nothing more than the mares in her father's stables, worth only as much as her womb and the bloodline it could continue'(63).

Despite her incessant efforts to win the approval of her father by acquiring knowledge in different fields, Draupadi is reduced to a womb. Reducing a woman born without a womb to a womb is ironic. By extending this argument to women in general it may be interpreted as a critique of the contemporary Indian society where obedient and docile women are still preferred daughter-in-laws, where women who choose to be focus on their career instead of getting married and having children are still judged and where they are paid less than men in several fields.

Hardened by her experiences Kunti behaves like a harsh teacher and regards Draupadi's emotional excess and her political naivete with disdain. But her words definitely ensure Draupadi's disillusionment with her family and the socio-politico-religious institutions that condition it. She develops a realistic understanding of her

position and the choices she can make in her life. She weighs the consequences of defying her father - punishment by death for bringing shame to her father or worse- disownment as she would be labelled 'a coward, unworthy of warrior lineage'(65). She chooses honour over death because according to the warrior code, death without honor was reprehensible and she did not want to be mistaken for a coward. She prefers the tag of a prostitute over a coward because the former had honor. Kunti therefore may be considered a driving force in her transformation from a naïve maiden into 'a woman, practiced in all the arts and intricacies of women'(38).

Kunti's apparent schooling of Draupadi in the tacts of survival is also the author's way of denouncing the patriarchal socio-economic structure where women are 'owned' by men. A girl is owned by her father, a wife by her husband and a mother by her sons. Duryodhana would not have been offended by her laughter had she belonged to him. Men choose women they would like to own; women are chosen. Kunti has been recast as Draupadi's guide to survival in the wider context of the patriarchal power politics where women are merely commodities of exchange and thus expendable.

This commodification of women has been analysed and theorized by Luce Irigaray in her book *This Sex Which is Not One*. Irigaray draws on Karl Marx's theory of capital and commodities to argue that women are reduced to objects or commodities of exchange between men in the society. According to her this transaction of women between men becomes the basis of the functioning of society. Women thus are denied subjectivity by being reduced to items of exchange. While Das's critique of patriarchy is inspired by Irigaray's theories, her text does not approximate the latter's radicalism.

Das nevertheless deals with patriarchy in her own way in her text. The conversation between Kunti and Draupadi admits no sentimentalisation but has been fashioned as pragmatic woman-to-woman talk. By locating the discussion in women's quarters the author makes an attempt to address the womankind who must empathise with each other without letting emotions come in the way. Kunti realizes that patriarchy is entrenched in

the society and thus the best way of dealing with it starts with rationalizing it instead of bemoaning its inevitability. Women must therefore learn to take control of the situation rather than playing victim to it. Her interaction with her future daughter-in-law attests to this fact.

Das's text is also deserves attention for allowing Draupadi room for emotional outburst which assumes an almost cathartic dimension. Unlike the epic and the cults one does not simply presume her unquestioning acceptance. As mentioned earlier though Das's predecessors speak of Draupadi's suffering under polyandry, it happens within her mind. She is never afforded the scope of dialogue.

The feminist representation of Draupadi thus lies in her awareness of the position of women in the society. But instead of submitting herself as a victim she realizes that she must create a niche for herself in the face of severely limited options. Therefore her final acceptance of polyandry is a choice she makes as an aware individual. This exercise of choice thus transforms her from an object of exchange from her father to her husbands into an aware subject. This transformation of Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata, often referred to as the incarnation of Sri, the goddess of Gingee into a vulnerable human being who is capable of shaping her identity is a movement towards the secularization of the sacred. The humanity of the 'goddess' makes her more accessible and relatable to the contemporary reader.

However I would like to point out that the humanization of Draupadi is made possible at the expense of oversimplifying the epic which is a complex work compiled over centuries. Das's text seems to function in a socio-politico-historical vacuum and her representation of Draupadi at times appears superficially dramatic. Several major incidents from the epic have been either ignored or a passing reference has been made to them. Certain events get distorted and modified which makes her narrative inconsistent.

The function of Draupadi is way more complex than what we see in her text. In the epic her identity is not confined to her maternal role. She survives her sons. The Pandavas are succeeded by Subhadra's grandson Parikshita. Draupadi is much more than a daughter,

a wife and a mother. She is the voice of wisdom and resistance. She is the boat that rescues the Pandavas when they lose themselves in the dicing hall. Her patience and perseverance during their forest exile is commendable.

So while Das does address patriarchy by focusing on Draupadi, her tremendously eclectic selection of episodes from the epic fails to recapture the radiance of Draupadi. Therefore, one feels wary of investing too much in such works which fall short of finding a consistent voice and thus may hardly afford an alternative reading of the epic. Hence one wonders if the title of the text is apt.

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