

THE POLITICS OF 'CHOICE': FROM YAJNASENI TO DEEYA PANCHAL.

Roshni

Assistant Professor
Aryabhatta College,
University of Delhi

Abstract

Indian chick lit, also referred as 'Desi Lit' or 'Ladki Lit' represents the Indianisation of chicklit, a genre fiction popularized by the publication of Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones' Diary in the UK in 1996 and Candace Brushnell's The Sex and the City in the USA in 1997. Having come into existence around a decade after Bridget Jones' Diary, Desi lit has created a niche for itself in the Indian market. Aditi Kotwal's Draupadi in High Heels (2013), is a work of chicklit with a mythological twist where the protagonist Deeya Panchal shares "karmic connections" with Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata. With rather forced comparisons between the two, the text explores an alternative scenario where Draupadi could 'choose' her husband. Given the limitations of chicklit as a market-oriented genre, the text discounts the complexity of the Epic which underscores the conflict between agency and destiny and where every decision has compound socio-political nuances. This paper will therefore examine Kowal's novel to analyse and understand the implications of adapting Draupadi as a chick lit protagonist and whether Deeya, an economically independent woman of the modern globalised twenty-first century world, is necessarily more empowered than Draupadi.

Keywords: *Indian chicklit, epic, popular literature, market-oriented, agency, empowerment.*

THE POLITICS OF 'CHOICE': FROM YAJNASENI TO DEEYA PANCHAL

- Roshni

The term 'chicklit' was coined in 1995 by Cris Mazza and Jaffery Deshell in their text *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*. The origin of the genre however is generally traced back to the publications of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the UK in 1996 and Candace Brushnell's *The Sex and the City* in the USA in 1997.

Indian chick lit, also referred as 'Desi Lit' or 'Ladki Lit', however, is a relatively newer phenomenon that started about a decade after the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Some of the most popular works of the Indian Chicklit include, *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003) by Kavita Daswani, *Imaginary Men* (2005) by Anjali Banerjee, *Almost Single* (2007) by Advaita Kala, *Girl Most Likely To* (2007) by Poonam Sharma and *The Zoya Factor* (2008) by Anuja Chauhan.

While it may not represent everywoman, the genre is spawning interest in the young urban English educated women of the country. It attempts to universalize the experience of a particular class of young women across the world who apparently 'are the same everywhere...have the same problems of boyfriends and bosses...drink coffee, love to shop and have fun', as quoted by Rama Lakshmi in her 2007 article titled, 'India's Cheeky Chicklit Finds an Audience'.

This paper will look at Aditi Kotwal's *Draupadi in High Heels*, a work of chicklit published in 2013 where the author has tried to contemporise Draupadi in the form of Deeya Panchal, the proud owner of an elite fashion store. While Kotwal's text is quite distinct from the Mahabharata in terms of its settings, characterisation, vocabulary, genre, etc it loosely follows the epic storyline. This paper will therefore examine Kowal's novel to analyse and understand the implications of adapting Draupadi as a chick lit protagonist and whether Deeya, an economically independent woman of the modern globalised twenty-first century world, is necessarily more empowered than Draupadi. An attempt will be made to analyse and understand if and how Kotwal's novel 'speaks' to the Epic.

Draupadi, the daughter of King Drupad of Panchala, the wife of the Pandavas, the queen of Indraprastha, and the friend of Krishna Vasudeva, is one of the most contentious queens of the Mahabharata. Despite having been presented as the epitome of womanhood, she has often been ridiculed as the symbol of female lust and promiscuity since the text and the time of the Epic. While the Epic tries to justify her polyandry, by citing precedents and making reference to Shiva's boon, even in the world of the Epic, her social position as a married woman is quite precarious and thus has been challenged several times by Kauravas, Karna, Jayadratha, Kichaka, etc. Since Draupadi has a momentous role in the narrative, one wonders if and how the chain of events could have been altered if she were monogamous, if she could 'choose' her husband given her limited agency in the socio-political matrix of the patriarchal world of the epic. Kotwal toys with this idea in her chicklit novel by juxtaposing Draupadi, the princess of Panchal with Deeya Panchal, the owner of a 'high- fashion store in Colaba'(Kotwal 6).

The cover page of *Draupadi in High Heels* features a woman clad in a yellow saree along with high heels and purses, typical of Indian chicklit. The name Draupadi in the title of the text instantly reminds one of the Mahabharata. The author tries to blend chicklit with epic by incorporating elements of each genre. Deeya, the heroine of the novel is an attractive and accomplished young woman with a perfect physique. She unlike most chicklit heroines, is economically secure and does not struggle with her appearance and bodyweight. This socially, economically and aesthetically privileged characterization of Deeya, so different from typically relatable chicklit heroines is aimed at enabling her identification with Draupadi. Like Draupadi, she is dark in complexion, incredibly attractive and of marriageable age. Since she is a subject of the patriarchal society, the social obligation of marriage weighs her down. But even as she agrees to the idea of marriage, like a chicklit heroine she certainly does not give up her quest of 'true love' and the novel revolves around it.

Chicklit as a genre, underscores the significance of a fulfilling love life in the lives of its heroines. A chicklit heroine's ability to settle with Mr. Right while not imperative, forms a consequential part of her happy ending and is regarded as one of her greatest accomplishments. Finding a perfect match for herself, therefore is one of her greatest anxieties in the novel. In fact, for a lot of chicklit novels, happy ending is synonymous with finding the right partner. *Draupadi in High Heels* follows suit. Deeya meets Karan Ravi, corresponding to Karna from the Epic, in the first chapter titled 'Inflight Entertainment' and is instantly infatuated by his physical appearance. The title of the chapter lends a deliberate element of frivolity to her attraction towards

Karan. The description of Karan Ravi offers a blend of *Mills and Boon* romances and Karna's description from the epic. From Deeya's first encounter with Karan Ravi in the first chapter to a description of their happily married life in the last chapter, the novel seeks to draw parallels between Deeya and Draupadi.

Both Draupadi and Deeya appear as adults in their respective narratives and their weddings are significant events. The Epic invests deeply in the wedding of Draupadi starting with the event of her swayamvara. Her wedding has been represented as one of the turning points within the Epic narrative whereby the balance of power between the Pandavas and the Kauravas undergoes drastic changes. The Pandavas, who up to that point in the epic were living incognito get military, political, social and economic advantage by forming matrimonial alliance with King Drupad. The latter, on the other hand becomes an ally of the Pandavas, as a part of his revenge strategy against Dronacharya. Thus, despite Arjun's singlehanded victory in the archery contest on the occasion of Draupadi's swayamvara, she is married to the brothers collectively. The princess of Panchal thus becomes an item of exchange between the Pandavas and King Drupad, which reminds one of Luce Irigaray's essay 'When the goods get together' where she points out that patriarchal societies subsist on trade which happens 'exclusively among men' and where 'women, signs, goods, currency, all pass from one man to another' (Irigaray 107).

Draupadi however defies such simplistic categorisation as a passive object of exchange. Her polyandrous marriage has been traced back to Shiva's blessing from her previous birth. There is another reference to her insatiable sexual desires in one of her earlier lives as Nalayani, wife of Moudgalya Maharishi whereby she is fated to have five husbands in her next life. So, there is a suggestion that Draupadi 'chose' her destiny. However, in the world of the Epic itself it is clear that despite precedents like Jatila and the Prachetas, a polyandrous marriage was socially discouraged and that Draupadi had to bear the brunt of it all her life.

Compared to the Epic, Deeya's world is simpler. Though her parents want her to get married as soon as possible, their role is limited to organising a party of eligible bachelors for her, described as a modern swayamvara in the text. Deeya is free to choose her husband. Her marriage is a private affair and lacks the far-reaching socio-politico-economic ramifications associated with Draupadi's wedding. The last chapter of the novel describes her happily married life. So, while the plot of the novel revolves around her anxiety of selecting a suitable husband for herself, the event of wedding itself is withheld by the author. This is probably to underscore the significance of the selection of the 'right' husband, characteristic of chicklit. Deeya

who feels her life in some way corresponds with Draupadi's life, eventually escapes her fate by choosing Karan, instead of Arjun or Dharam who represent the Pandavas.

In the Epic, Draupadi's polyandrous wedding is precipitated by Kunti's intervention who orders her sons to share her between themselves. Deeya has a monogamous marriage with Karan, after her short-term relationships with Arjun and Dharam Kapur. On Deeya's first visit to her house, Kirti Kapur, mother of Arjun, Dharam and Vyom Kapur, makes the following remark: 'Actually, I've taught my sons to share any good thing that comes their way. But I doubt my sons will want to share you with anybody.' (Kotwal 57) Her words are reminiscent of Kunti from the Epic. However, unlike the epic where the Pandavas are five brothers, Kotwal omits Nakul and Sahadev from Deeya's world. The Pandavas are represented by Dharam, Arjun and Vyom Kapur corresponding to Yudhishthir, Arjun and Bhima from the Epic.

Like the Epic, Deeya rejects Karan in her 'swayamvara'. But whereas Draupadi's rejection of Karna was premised on his low caste status, and had obvious political nuances, Deeya's initial rejection of Karan Ravi is mostly a reflection of her immature evaluation, sexual jealousy and impetuous decision-making. Therefore, even as she makes a derogatory comment on Karan's relative low class, it is apparent that her attack on his socio-economic position is motivated by Dhara's miscommunication.

But even as Kotwal draws parallels between Draupadi and Deeya, her novel marks significant departures from the Epic. For instance, while Draupadi was molested by Duryodhana and Dussasana, cousins of the Pandavas, Deeya faces the unwanted sexual advances of Vyom Kapur. It is ironic that Bhima, the only husband of Draupadi, who stands up for her even against his brothers, has been reduced to a lascivious character in the novel. Interestingly Duryodhana and Dussasana represented by Dhiraj and Dhiren Kapur respectively, who like the Epic are friends with Karan Ravi have no interaction with Deeya. Also, unlike the Epic, Karan Ravi has cordial relationships with Deeya's father Drupad Panchal and is one the invitees to her modern swayamvara party.

In the Epic, Kunti tries to lure Karna to the Pandavas' side during the great battle between the cousins by offering him an opportunity to be Draupadi's sixth husband. In Kotwal's novel the property and business-related disputes between the cousins – Dharam and Dhiren do not have any bearing on the fate of Deeya. Though Dharam feels envious of Karan Ravi, his mother encourages Deeya to follow her heart and choose Karan Ravi as her husband instead of Dharam Kapur. Like the epic, Karan Ravi is Kirti Kapur's son before marriage.

While Draupadi's married life is replete with challenges, Deeya's wedding happens after she overcomes the apparent challenges placed before her. Thus, despite their meeting in the first chapter, Deeya and Karan are married only in the last chapter. Their union is delayed because of Deeya's vulnerability to Dhara's gossip. Kotwal has seemingly juxtaposed Draupadi's sexual jealousy of Subhadra with Deeya's jealousy of Dhara and in doing so has blurred the boundaries between Karna and Arjuna, the great heroes from the Epic.

Unlike the Epic, Deeya has an unambiguous support system around her in the form of her family, her best friends Minti and Krish Gopinathan, her husband Karan Ravi and even Kirti Kapur as opposed to Draupadi who despite her father and brother, her friend Krishna Vasudeva and her five husbands to protect her, is repeatedly placed in situations where she struggles by herself and hence laments being 'nathavati anathvat'(someone who despite having husbands is utterly helpless and alone) in the Assembly Hall where she is humiliated and molested by the Kauravas. The impediments placed before Draupadi are quite challenging and overwhelming.

A comparison between *Draupadi in High Heels* and *The Mahabharata* makes it apparent that the complexities of the epic world have been conveniently sidestepped by Kotwal who at best makes passing references to specific events from Draupadi's life. Kotwal's attempted juxtaposition of Deeya with Draupadi stands problematised possibly because of the following reasons:

Firstly, Deeya and Draupadi belong to two very different genres. The seriousness of an epic stands in sharp relief from the preoccupations of a chicklit which is often regarded as a non-serious form of literature despite its defenders. This difference in the nature of these genres becomes a major challenge to Kotwal's attempt at synthesizing the two.

Secondly, the analogy between Draupadi and Deeya entails that the latter experiences challenges which are reminiscent of the events of the epic. So Kowal is obligated to approximate the events of the Epic. But since her novel is a work of chicklit, the challenges placed before the heroine are not meant to be insurmountable since chicklit represents "a familiar world in which, however, one's problems can be solved more easily"(Mißler 86) as argued by Heike Mißler in her book, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism and Representation*. Thus, even as Deeya appears to share 'karmic connections' with Draupadi, her 'happy ending' must be secured.

Thirdly, readers must be able to identify with a chicklit heroine above everything else. This relatability of the heroine with the readers is a part of the appeal

of chicklit as pointed out by Mißler. Chicklit does not aspire to bring about a radical overhaul of the society. While highlighting the challenges faced by contemporary women of the society, it spins around the life of a heroine who is relatable and recognisable by the readers. Deeya's infatuation with Karan Ravi, her affection for her best-friend Minti, her jealousy for Dhara Kapur, etc. make her an engaging and approachable character. On the other hand, Deeya's excessive identification with Draupadi may compromise her relatability with contemporary readers.

Fourthly as Mißler has pointed out, chicklits are known for predictable narratives. 'The expert chick-lit reader, so to speak, will more or less be able to predict what is going to happen. The pleasure of the text then partly lies within its predictability for the reader.' (Mißler 87) *Draupadi in High Heels* is doubly predictable since it is not just a work of chicklit but also tries to recreate *The Mahabharata*, a popular text. While it incorporates characters from the Epic, it does not invest much in an adaptation of the same. It toys with the idea of a modern Draupadi who is independent, loves shopping, has friends and finds her one true love, thus following the chicklit formula. Deeya, despite her lush lifestyle, strikes a common chord with her readers.

It therefore becomes obvious that even as Kotwal's novel is named after Draupadi, her work is primarily a chicklit and thus bound by the limitations of the genre. Deeya is a far cry from Draupadi. Even her name which translates as an earthen lamp in Hindi and is associated with light, an aspect of fire is a subduing of Yajnaseni, another name for Draupadi who emerged out of the sacrificial fire and symbolises the fire of wrath, retribution, ambition, passion and also knowledge. An earthen lamp pales in comparison with the flames of sacrificial fire just as Deeya appears feeble in comparison with Draupadi.

Deeya Panchal despite her economic independence and elite social stature falls short of making decisions in her life independently. She constantly seeks the guidance and support of her friends and even Kirti Kapoor. Her love for Karan alone does not bring them together. Her 'decision' to marry him is inspired by Kirti. There is an obvious suggestion in the novel that Deeya's naivete and lack of foresightedness were largely responsible for her unsavoury experiences with Arjun Kapur and his brothers. Had she been wiser, she could have 'selected' a willing Karan Ravi in her 'swayamvara' and hence avoided herself lot of trouble. While Vyom's treatment of her may border on molestation, she never really confronts him. She does not hold the Kapur brothers accountable for their misbehaviour. Further, despite her financial independence, she

does not appear as assertive as may be expected of her in contemporary times. Compared to her, Draupadi appears much more articulate about her rights. While she was not entirely responsible for the battle between the cousins, she emerged as a major impetus for the same. Thus, it is apparent that a simplistic relationship between economic independence and agency is premature.

Kotwal's project of representing Draupadi as a chicklit protagonist may appear feasible at first glance. For instance, the outspoken, assertive character of Draupadi can be tapped into a chicklit story. Instances of a romantic relationship between Draupadi and Karna are found in the Jaina Purana, adaptations of *The Mahabharata* by contemporary authors and also folktales. So pairing Draupadi with Karna feeds off the popular expectations and provides scope for a perfect fairytale, characteristic of chicklit. Kotwal conveniently substitutes vengeance with love interest. She makes us wonder if the epic would have changed had Draupadi chosen independently and wisely. The swayamwara promised in the epic (where Draupadi really had no agency) is actualised in her novel where Deeya is free to choose her husband.

But this juxtaposition between Draupadi and Deeya Panchal happens at the cost of diluting the complexity of the epic. The fiery Yajnaseni who emerged out of sacrificial fires to cause the destruction of the Kshatriyas has been reduced to a high maintenance Deeya whose aim is finding her one true love. One wonders if Kotwal expects her readers to view Draupadi in this limited sense. In the novel, Deeya resolves to be cordial with Dhiraj and Dhiren because of the love she bears for her husband – a product of Kotwal's imagination. The great battle between the cousins has been reduced to a business rivalry. The author's ambitious attempt of modernising Draupadi as Deeya has come to naught.

The fact that Deeya and Draupadi belong to two entirely different worlds limits correspondence between them. Draupadi belongs to the world of epic, and thus separated from Deeya by 'an absolute epic distance' (Bakhtin 13) as pointed by Mikhail M. Bakhtin in his article 'Epic and Novel'. Deeya, a chicklit heroine, is associated with a genre that is 'manufactured upon the readers' demand...written to sell and to make profit, literature having no more the status of art, but of business' as argued by Andrea Petrache in her article 'Chick Lit's Genesis: Background to the advent of Commercial Literature for Women'.

Further the publication of *Draupadi in High Heels* by Penguin Metro Reads series, which caters to readers looking for 'books which don't weigh you down with complicated stories, don't ask for much time' as pointed out by Suman Gupta in her article – 'Indian 'Commercial' Fiction in English, the Publishing Industry and Youth

Culture' (Gupta 52) already categorises it as a frivolous form of writing thereby rendering any similarity between Deeya and Draupadi quite futile in terms of providing a re-reading of the Epic heroine.

Thus, it may be concluded that Kotwal's attempt to recreate Draupadi in a postfeminist world fails since she does not engage with the socio-political and religious complexities of the Epic but ignores them altogether. While the possibility that Draupadi's marriage with Karna could have potentially altered the narrative of the Epic can initiate an interesting line of inquiry, it needs to be explored in a tenable scenario with the seriousness it demands and it is obvious that the world of chicklit cannot afford it.

Works Cited:

- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Gupta, Suman. "Indian 'Commercial' Fiction in English, the Publishing Industry and Youth Culture." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2012, pp.46-53.
- Irigaray, Luce. "When the Goods Get Together", translated by Claudia Reeder in Elaine Marks and Isabelle Courtivron eds., *New French Feminism: An Anthology*. Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheat, 1981.
- Kotwal, Aditi. *Draupadi in High Heels*. Penguin Metro Reads, 2013.
- Lakshmi, Rama. "India's Cheeky Chicklit Finds an Audience." *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 2007, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/22/AR2007112201415.html?hpid=sec-world>. Accessed 02 October 2020.
- Miler, Heike. *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism, and Representation*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.
- Petrache, Andrea. "RATE Issues." *Chick Lit's Genesis. Background to the Advent of Commercial Literature for Women*, 2018, rate.org.ro/blog2.php/1/chick-lit-s-genesis-background. Accessed 02 October 2020.