

Vyasa's Draupadi: A Feminist Representation

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Abstract

In the Ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is the daughter of King Drupada of Panchala, who becomes the wife of the five Pandavas. When Yudhisthira becomes the king of Hastinapura, Indraprastha and the Emperor of India at the end of the war, Draupadi becomes his Queen. In one of the earliest recorded protests against a male dominated world and society, Draupadi's characteristic fight against injustice reflects one of the first acts of feminism – a fight for one's rights; in this case, the right to avenge the wrongs inflicted on her. In this work she is exemplified as one of the earliest feminists, be it in terms of polyandry, regarded as a matter of censure by society, then and now, or in terms of her thirst for revenge. My paper celebrates both: the woman in Draupadi, and the feminist.

Keywords: protests, male-dominated, society, injustice, feminism, rights

Draupadi

I stare down from the stars
Wonder where the story changed course
Being portrayed as cause of the wars
When I was jeered at and humiliated by force?

Being shared by five men was written in my fate
I was not loved and wed, but a prize for their skill
I never felt belonged was just served on a plate
A plate you could pass on when you had your fill

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I still wonder the way they staked me for dice
 Was I a partner for life, prize or property?
 Palace stood helpless, witness of the vice
 Now they raise a brow; put a mark on my chastity?

Yet I hear the stories being told below
 Kurukshetra was a great war, Draupadi sowed the seed
 A woman caused the war, meaning the men were mellow?
 I had only lived my life serving their need and feed

No, the war was not due to need of power and greed of land
 No, the war was not due to injustice served and ego of the clans
 No, the war was not due to wronged men and righteous stand
 No, the war was not due to game of dice and scheming plans

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!!
 Anonymous

Innumerable controversies. Uncountable opinions. Infinite wars of words. One name conjured. Draupadi.

Nrisinha Prasad Bhaduri, in his essay, *Panch Kanyas: Condemnation and Expiation*, reiterates a tenet from the scriptures that if one wakes up in the morning and chants the names of the five 'kanyas' (*daughters*), Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari, one will be redeemed from all sins. Among the Panch Kanyas, Draupadi and Kunti belong to the *Mahabharata* and the rest – Ahalya, Tara and Mandodari – belong to the *Ramayana*.

One of the most prominent and exceedingly interesting female characters within the Hindu religion, Draupadi originates in Hindu mythology within one of the greatest magnum opuses of all times, the *Mahabharata*.

The *Mahabharata* is where Draupadi's history begins... A history that is strongly imprinted on the sands of time, as in Hindu mythology, few women stand out as significantly as the character of Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandava princes in the *Mahabharata*.

Kunti dies in a forest fire. Her daughter-in-law, Draupadi, on the other hand, takes birth from the resplendently bright flames of fire. Like Athena and Durga, Draupadi emerges in all the beautiful glory of full-grown youth from the fire-altar. Vyasa states that the creator had rendered her with beauty that surpassed that of all other women and enthralled everybody and won the hearts of all men around. That is why Draupadi's icon holds in one hand a parrot, the vehicle of Kama, the god of eroticism. And all men in her vicinity were so overwhelmed by desire for her that they became enemies to one another. This is very well testified in the *swayamvara* (*ceremony of choosing one's own spouse*) hall where the kings are ready to take up arms against each other to stake claim on her. And again in the potter's hut, where Arjuna brings her after winning her in the *swayamvara*, and all the Pandavas are immediately entranced by her. Noticing this and thereby recalling Vyasa's prophecy, Yudhishtira announces that she would be their common wife.

The details that conditioned her marriage might be many and varied. Kunti's erringly uttered verdict might be the apparent cause behind her living her controversial, polyandrous life with five husbands. But the marriage also carried a political implication, clearly defined in the mind of Yudhishtira, who realised that the desire with which the brothers looked at and on Draupadi following Kunti's verdict, could very favourably be substantiated by a social solution. Yudhishtira feared a falling out, in the near future, among the brothers over the personal possession of Draupadi, and hence her equal possession by all the Pandavas was amicably agreed upon. Draupadi was neither the perpetrator of this social transgression nor did she enter into a polyandrous contract of her own accord. She had, rather, given her heart to the noble Arjuna at her *swayamvara*. The intricate web of polyandry that she had got entangled in, had been bestowed upon her by destiny. There is no reason, whatsoever, to thrust the fault of transgression on her. In fact, she had nothing to gain but life-long misery as she had not only lost her first love, Arjuna, but her husbands too had to be content with only one-fifth share of her love. And that too, in turn. Thus, the transgression actually spelt loss and sorrow for all.

What adds more pathos to this intensely tragic state of events is that all her life, Draupadi had to quietly endure the ignominy of many fleeting references to her multiple husbands, at times crudely bordering on the disgrace of being termed a prostitute.

Karna had, in fact, openly remarked in a crowded assembly that a woman who had more than one husband definitely enjoyed the sport like a prostitute. Yet, the respect that Draupadi commands can never be mitigated. She is a heroine who is unpredictable, steadily determined and who could also possess the austerity of a traditional Hindu wife. Many see Draupadi as an early feminist because of her fearlessness in confronting those who harmed her or her family. Draupadi existed in a time when a woman's role was to meekly serve her husband. Dr Vanamala Bhawalkar states "[in] Draupadi's Era, there was no question of women's equality with men. The wife was the counterpart of her husband and both together became a complete person.

As Milton had said "He for God and she for the God in him" was true in those days" (Bhawalkar 150). The unique relationship between Draupadi and her husbands is what makes her story so exceptional. Draupadi, the wife of the mighty Pandava brothers was anything but a conventional wife; she was smart, bold and would often provoke her husbands into action.

Till Draupadi comes into the forefront with Arjuna winning her hand in marriage and bringing her home with him, Kunti had dominated in the narrative line as the central female interest and as a strongly matriarchal figure. Thereafter, as Draupadi replaces Kunti as the central female interest in the epic with the *Sabha Parva*, Pradip Bhattacharya in his *Panchkanya: Women of Substance*, notes that there is also a "sudden decline in the status of women itself" (Bhattacharya 67-83). What initiates this degradation is Draupadi's silently accepting the unique, singular stance as the common wife of five brothers, in spite of the grave protests voiced by her father and brother against this multiple husbanding. This is very significant because as opposed to this silent submission to polyandry, immediately before this she had shocked and surprised everyone by publicly refusing Karna's suit, even though her father had announced that anybody passing the test would win her hand. Brought up amidst affluence and luxury, educated and well brought up, the daughter of King Drupada had grown up to be an aggressive woman who spoke her mind in a world where women would silently suffer than speak.

Whenever provoked, she challenged the male ego without the typical cause and effect analysis that stopped the women of her time in raising their voices against male atrocities. The first infamous-famous polyandrous woman, she handled the love of five brothers with great pride and deftness.

Draupadi was beautiful, but as Bhawalkar notes, it was not just her beauty that won her praise. It was her ability to balance her beauty with the desirable traits of a wife that gained her devotion and affection everywhere she went: “Yudhisthira said that she was such that any man would desire and that she never committed any sin. Bhima equaled her to the ancient famous wives. Her mother-in-law Kunti praised her for the virtues and her laudable behavior with all her husbands” (Bhawalkar 141). Draupadi exhibited as much dexterity in the arts of being a woman, and everything associated with womanhood, as she was gifted in beauty. Her words and opinions were well-respected and supported by her family due to her vast knowledge of many subjects. Unlike many women in her era, Draupadi’s father, Drupada, allowed Draupadi to be educated. Bhawalkar comments on Draupadi’s education: “Drupada had engaged learned Brahmanas for the education of his sons. Draupadi also joined them and became an expert in Political Science” (Bhawalkar 3). Draupadi’s strength and courage were the result of her education, which also lent her a sense of confidence unfamiliar to most women of her time. Draupadi was a quick learner and was always in pursuit of knowledge; she had a sharp memory and a deeply insightful knowledge of many subjects. Bhawalkar comments on the success of Draupadi as a student: “She became known as Pandita (learned and wise) and grew up a charming maiden admired by all” (Bhawalkar 4).

Her intellect and knowledge did not however cause her to be vain and arrogant or be an impediment in her striving to be a dutiful wife. “Draupadi was a devoted wife, chaste, religious minded and adhering to duty. Her integrity and fidelity were admirable. She was always careful to please her husbands, served not only them but even their wives” (Bhawalkar 142).

Draupadi’s soft nature, however, did not render her submissive or soft-spoken. She was the only known woman to have, shockingly for her time, openly insulted the Kuru elders and her husbands. This episode is set during the famous, yet fateful, dicing match between Yudhishtira and Duryodhana. The highly unpleasant events set in motion the action of the remainder the epic.

Most significantly, we now find Draupadi as a carefully and fully developed character, instead of the stereotypical figure she cut when she was introduced, whose qualities could be those of any heroine of the Indian literary tradition. Now, in the *sabha* (assembly) of the Kauravas, we are made aware of her as an individual. As Kisari Mohan Ganguly states in *Mahabharata Book 1: Adi Parva*, that dressed in only one garment and menstruating, she was dragged into the assembly. Infuriated, she sweeps her glance across her five husbands, who sit in front of the gathered nobles and watch her humiliation. For, Yudhishtira, in his last desperate bid to win back the kingdom, has staked her as his last possession. The question whether Draupadi has been legitimately won is debated by the kings. But Karna, strongly insistent that she has been, orders Duhsasana to strip her garment from her body. Completely degraded in front of all kings, Draupadi's grim situation has only been ameliorated through supernatural intervention. Her outraged modesty finds an outlet in her angry words addressed to the kings, demanding to know how they, who are supposedly learned in the proper ways of conduct, could silently look on while she was being humiliated. The episode also highlights that the beautiful Draupadi is also quick-witted with a gift of the gab. Her debating skills are exemplary and at the conclusion of the episode we realise that her wit has saved her husbands from impending slavery. Our sympathy reaches out to this wronged woman, a princess, a queen, yet hapless, who has to look to her own resources to save not only herself, but also her husbands, and finally her sons.

What is left of the Dharma of the kings? Draupadi's question echoes in the ears of the nobility in the assembly. Her words are not just a plea of a humiliated and helpless woman, but also a challenge to the knowledge of right and wrong of the kings. It was a step unimaginable for a woman of her time and setting. Draupadi's question is not an antiquated question of a wronged, virtuous queen whose integrity has been put on stake. Rather, it holds as much importance and relevance now as it did then. It is a question of the protection of those who find themselves unprotected in a system.... A question every young woman would want to ask the established security system of the nation post the gang-rape, brutal assault and consequent death of the twenty-three year old paramedic student in Delhi on the 16th of December, 2012.

A pioneer of feminism, she fought for her rights when her enslaved husbands lost her in a game of dice. In a court full of the most powerful kings of the time, here was a woman who dared to stand for herself and speak up, aloud, against male-perpetrated injustices.

With remarkable dignity and self-respect, she also refused the third boon offered to her by Dhritarashtra as peace-offering. Her husbands freed and in possession of their weapons with the first two boons, she did not need a third one. Besides, she no longer desired any favours from anyone. Her only desire now rested in the fulfillment of her vow for vengeance and the beginning of an insatiable desire for justice that is only quenched upon her enemy's blood running through her hair.

After the incident at the court of the Kurus, Draupadi emerges as a much more powerful character and this is seen in the interactions with her husbands. The result of the gambling match was that the Pandavas, with Draupadi went into exile for twelve years, and were to dwell quite incognito during another year. The period of thirteen years being successfully completed, they were at liberty to return.

Twelve years of exile were passed in the jungle, and in the course of this period Jayadratha, king of Sindhu, visited the Pandavas while they were out hunting and tried to induce Draupadi to elope with him. Physically assaulted by him, Draupadi called aloud for vengeance. With Bhima kicking and beating him till he was senseless, Draupadi's revenge was then slaked.

In the thirteenth year, in which her husbands and she were to live undiscovered, they entered the service of the king of Virata, and she, without acknowledging any connection with them, became a waiting-maid to the queen. She lived a quiet life for a while, but her beauty excited the passions of Kichaka, the queen's brother. She was offered no protection from the queen, and was rebuked for her complaints and petulance by Yudhishtira. Infuriated and humiliated, she appealed to Bhima, complaining of her menial position, of the insults she had been subjected to and of the neglect of her husband. Bhima beat up the unfortunate Keechaka but was found out, and Draupadi was condemned to be burnt on the funeral pile of Keechaka. Then Bhima disguised himself and tearing up a tree for a club, went to her rescue. He released Draupadi and they returned to the city by different ways.

Draupadi had five sons, one by each husband. With these five sons, she was present in camp on the eighteenth and last night of the great battle, while her victorious husbands were in the camp of the defeated enemy.

Aswatthaman, with two companions, entered the camp of the Pandavas, cut down these five youths, and all those who they came across on their way. Draupadi called for vengeance upon Aswatthaman and appealed to Bhima.

Bhawalkar remarks on Draupadi's relationship with her husbands: "Draupadi was not a dumb follower of her husbands. She had her own individuality. Though soft speaking she used harsh words to her husbands and others when necessary" (Bhawalkar 143). This boldness is what sets her apart from other women in the epics. The Pandavas often looked to Draupadi for guidance and approval. She was widely recognized for this aggressive attitude and her enemies were wary of her power.

"She could argue forcibly to win her point with apt quotations and illustrations from her fund of knowledge on various subjects like righteousness, duties and codes of conduct for the four Varnas (castes), moral, legal and ethical codes and was called Dharmajna, Dharmadarsini" (Bhawalkar 141). Although Draupadi was desperate for revenge on those who harmed her, her distinction between right and wrong was rarely clouded and she was often in pursuit of justice.

Draupadi was not invincible, she was greatly affected by conflict and would become emotional. It is Draupadi's ability to overcome adversity in a venerable manner that sets her apart from other women. In the *Mahabharata* she proves that no situation is insurmountable, and she never abandons her husbands, regardless of the positions they lead her into. Throughout the epic the true character of Draupadi emanates, displaying her individuality, strength, and unyielding determination for both justice and vengeance. Through these characteristics the figure of Draupadi has come to be a symbol of empowerment for women and has gained the worship of many followers. Not only is Draupadi an empowering character, but she was a devoted wife, chaste, religious minded and adhering to duty and thus a remarkable role model for Hindu women. Draupadi's distinction among other women from the epics is paramount and well deserved; she was far ahead of her time, often found commanding her husbands to do her bidding.

It is her ability to use her position with responsibility and insight that show her true power as a woman.

If the *Mahabharata* is an intricately woven saga of intense hatred and passionate love, ruthless bloodshed and noble thoughts, awe-inspiring courage and cowardice, beauty and gentleness, victory and defeat, then Draupadi is its shining jewel, casting the shadow of her towering personality over the epic poem and the all destroying war it vividly describes, and thereby, sowing the earliest seeds of the fight of a woman for her rights.... What we deem feminism today. The superb qualities of Draupadi, like steadfast devotion to duty, spirit of self sacrifice, fortitude; courage, capacity for hard work, presence of mind, perseverance, endurance, thirst for knowledge, wisdom to discriminate between right and wrong and strength to fight against injustice, truth, modesty, forgiveness, softness and harshness as the occasion demanded, these and such other qualities seen in Draupadi are universal and beyond the limit of time and space.

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