

ISSN: 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multi-Disciplinary e-Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Vol. 3 Issue 3 June 2017

Impact Factor 1.854

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

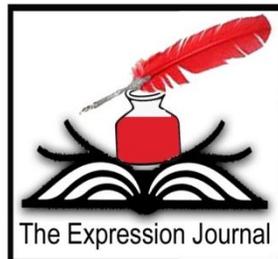
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The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 1.854)

www.expressionjournal.com

ISSN: 2395-4132



DRAUPADI AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER BINARIES

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Abstract

'Gender' as a socio-cultural construct and a site of contest can be analyzed through various interpretations of the character of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* and the events narrated therein. She raises her voice every time she is treated under the cultural construct of femininity. Draupadi rips apart a misnomer that the virtuous and pious women in the Indian tradition are bereft of aggressive behaviour. The narrative of Draupadi breaks the overarching grand narrative into small pieces that allows Draupadi to garner a pivotal position in the plot. All the powerful and mighty warriors like Bhishma, Drona, Arjuna, and Bhima are relegated to peripheral positions.

Key-Words

Mahabharata, Draupadi, Feminism, Postmodernism, Gender, Binary.

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Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara Mandodari tatha/

Panchakanya smaranityam mahapataka nashaka//

(Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari- Remembering ever the virgins five destroy the greatest sins.)

- (Bhattacharya 13)

The above traditional Sanskrit exhortation quoted in Pradip Bhattacharya's article "Panchakanya: Women of Substance" is a perfect starting point to study Draupadi from a postmodern post-feminist perspective of gender. All of the five ladies mentioned above broke the conventions assigned sacred by the society and religion, yet they are revered. More often than not, Draupadi and Kunti have been at the wrong end of social conventions. Yet their perspective on the turn of events in the great epic has been a topic of debate in literary and non-literary circles. 'Gender' as a socio-cultural construct and a site of contest can be analyzed through various interpretations of the character of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata* and the events narrated therein. The episodes related to Draupadi will be analyzed and meanings will be formulated out of the representations of 'gender' in the *Mahabharata* in this article.

Born with her flaming beauty, Draupadi stands apart with her logical arguments, her revengeful attitude, and her anger that can burn the world. Fritz Blackwell terms Draupadi as the major figure of the *Mahabharata*: "If one single major figure can be singled out from

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that encyclopaedic epic; at any rate, someone has remarked that no Draupadi, no *Mahabharata*" (139).

Draupadi is antithetical to Shakespeare's great tragic heroine Desdemona, who was killed by her husband due to her silence and her inability to present her innocence before him. Draupadi raises her voice every time she is treated under the cultural construct of femininity. R. K. Narayan has aptly summarized the importance of her character in the epic: "The Kaurava-s are evil incarnate; powerful, clever, and accomplished. For the good of humankind, they must be wiped out, and Draupadi will play a great role in it" (52).

The royal grandeur of Draupadi can be gazed right from her birth. She sprung out of the holy fire of a *yajna* that was being performed by Drupada (the King of Panchala) to get a son capable of destroying Drona. King Drupada held a *svayamvara* to get a suitable groom for his daughter in which all the mighty princes and warriors of the country were invited. The Pandava-s, too, attended the *svayamvara* in the disguise of *brahmin*-s. A mighty bow was placed in the marriage hall. All the valiant warriors were given the challenge of putting string on the bow and shoot an arrow in the eye of a revolving fish overhead a water tank. The target needed to be aimed at by watching the reflection of the moving fish in the water tank. After Draupadi had disqualified Karna from participating in the competition, Arjuna rose, strung the bow with ease, and hit the target. Thus Draupadi was wedded to Arjuna.

Though Draupadi was won by Arjuna, she had to marry the other four brothers of Arjuna as well. Kunti's response to Bhima-Arjuna's announcement that they should enjoy together what they had brought, was by no means a casual remark. Kunti had sensed the danger of giving Draupadi to Arjuna alone as she had felt her other sons were also mesmerised with the matchless beauty of Draupadi. Kunti could see what was going on in the minds of her sons as "they began to think of Draupadi alone. Indeed, after those princes of immeasurable energy had looked at Draupadi, the God of Desire invaded their hearts and continued to crush all their senses" (Ganguli, *Adi Parva: Svayamvara Parva*: Section CLXLIII, 381).

This is surprising as to how Draupadi accepts something without questioning its moral enigma. There are various theories which justify polyandry in the Hindu knowledge texts and Draupadi seems to have abided by them. Born of sacrificial fire, Draupadi had the divine gift of restoring her virginity after consummating her marriage with every brother. As mentioned earlier, some feminist critics argue that Draupadi accepted the proposal of marrying the five brothers to invert the accepted social norms of polyandry. It is a rejection of the accepted conventions of one woman marrying a man and devoting her life for that man. It is a rejection of the gendered role of a wife to remain at the periphery and allow the man take the centre stage. Like an atom with the male nucleus and female electrons revolving on the periphery, Draupadi by this act of polyandry inverses the whole atomic structure by becoming the nucleus and pushing the five males on the outer orbit. This

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reversal of roles is Draupadi's first silent step towards realignment of gendered space in Hastinapur.

The court scene of Yudhishtira losing everything in the game of dice and Duryodhana's failed attempt to disrobe Draupadi is one of the most powerful and heart-wrenching episodes in the *Mahabharata*. The scene exposes the blatant patriarchal mindset of the court which was of the opinion that husband had the inherent right over his wife as if she were nothing but an object of pleasure. It is in this episode that Draupadi comes into her own and discloses the hypocrisy of learned people like Bhishma and Drona. It is a powerful manifestation of Draupadi's revolt on being considered a luxury item who could be put at stake by a monarch who had forgotten his *rajadharma*.

This episode gives birth to a new Draupadi, who is capable of challenging the morality of great elderly people and her own husbands. Pradip Bhattacharya has explained the intellectual strength of Draupadi:

Her questions show her to be intellectually far superior to all the courtiers. Instead of meekly obeying her husband's summons, as expected from her conduct so far, she sends back a query which remains unanswered till the end of the epic: can a gambler, having lost himself, stake his wife at all? (Bhattacharya, *Revisiting* 167)

Yudhishtira staked himself, his properties, his own brothers in their presence but he staked Draupadi in her absence. Draupadi questioned Yudhishtira's attempt of staking her when he had lost his own self and property in the first place. Draupadi argued that Yudhishtira had no right to stake her, as she was not his property. Even Yudhishtira could not answer her. She challenged all the elderly and respected people in the court. If Draupadi would have remained silent and nervous at the time she was being dragged to the assembly and she would have given herself silently to Kaurava-s, the *Mahabharata* would have become a patriarchal text.

Dushasana's attempt to disrobe Draupadi has not only dishonoured Draupadi but also put a question mark on the masculinity of the Pandava-s. Draupadi explains the meaning of morality and she frequently questions the definition of morality and virtue from everyone present in the court. She says that she is a highborn and a chaste woman yet she is compelled to enter the assembly full of men in such an uncomfortable situation. She says that it has been a tradition since the ancient time that the wedded wives of kings are never brought into the public court. However, the Kaurava-s have altered the ancient tradition and brought the wedded wife of king Yudhishtira in the court.

In his book, *The Argumentative Indian* (2005), Amartya Sen has expounded on the reason of Mahabharata War, "In the epic story of the *Mahabharata*, the good king Yudhishtira, reluctant to engage in a bloody battle, is encouraged to fight the usurpers of his throne with 'appropriate anger', and the most eloquent instigator is his wife Draupadi" (9). The tradition is inspired by a popular perception: "The Mahabharata War was fought to

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take revenge of the insult of Draupadi. She wanted vengeance and nothing would change her determination” (Chaitanya 8). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article “If Only,” argues directly that the insult of Draupadi is the main reason behind the *Mahabharata* war. The inhuman treatment of Draupadi in the presence of all the elders and her husband is undoubtedly one of the chief reasons behind the Mahabharata War.

There is an intriguing question which Draupadi has somehow not raised in the courtroom and she has allowed the elders of Hastinapur to evade an answer to a very uncomfortable issue. Draupadi cites her royal birth and her status of a queen to destroy the righteousness and high ethical ground of the people present in the courtroom. In other words, the act of dragging a queen in the courtroom and disrobing her is an unpardonable act of *adharma* (unethical behaviour). It is very much relevant for a postmodernist to question whether an act of disrobing a woman of low birth or a slave woman might have fallen within the long rope of courtly morals. There is a succinct difference between the disrobing of a ‘women’ and a ‘princess.’ The whole discourse in the *Sabha Parva* somehow hinges upon the royal lineage of Draupadi rather than the modesty of a woman. Nevertheless, these unasked questions remain unanswered until the text is reinterpreted from a postmodern perspective. A true surge from the periphery to the centre can be complete only when every woman, be it a queen or a slave, gets a chance to challenge the powerful patriarchal centre.

Two more incidents are integral to the understanding of Draupadi’s character, i.e. firstly, the attempt of Jayadaratha to abduct Draupadi from the *ashram* in the forest and secondly, Kicaka’s attempt to seduce Draupadi in the kingdom of Virata.

All these separate episodes related to Draupadi can be joined together to construct a powerful postmodernist analysis of gender in the text. There are three important points that need to be mentioned. Firstly, all these minor episodes represent the micro-narrative of Draupadi’s identity. The narrative breaks the overarching grand narrative into small pieces that allows Draupadi to garner a pivotal position in the plot. All the powerful and mighty warriors like Bhishma, Drona, Arjuna, and Bhima are relegated to peripheral positions.

Secondly, Draupadi rips apart a misnomer that the virtuous and pious women in the Indian tradition are bereft of aggressive behaviour. The aggression that is often associated with valour is transformed into a potent weapon of resistance by Draupadi. The phallogocentric charade of chivalry is deconstructed by a hyperactive and forthright retaliatory resistance against the parochial male centric worldview of ancient India. The idea of passive resistance has no place in Draupadi’s worldview.

Thirdly and finally, the moral and ethical taboos are reinterpreted by the character of Draupadi. The uniqueness of Draupadi’s character lies in her attitude towards polyandry, passivity, imposed restrictions of values and the delicacy associated with females. The

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quotation from *Panchakanya* at the beginning of the article aptly winds up the conclusion of Draupadi's character analysis.

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