

RE-RIGHTING' THE 'WRONGED' IMAGE OF DRAUPADI

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INTRODUCTION

In this narrative, an attempt is made to provide a character sketch of Draupadi. The possible reasons for choosing this character sketch are many. Besides, being the leading lady and the most popular female character in the whole of Mahabharata, she was also one of the most controversial and complex female character ever written in Hindu literature. On one hand, she is an epitome of simplicity, womanly, generous and compassionate character and on the other hand, she is this fearless, unpardoning, unforgiving and intelligent character ever written in any ancient Hindu text or literature. She is a lady with self-respect and always carried herself with dignity. If anyone ever tried doing any wrong to her, she could wreak havoc on those individual. She is this character who is uncompromising when it comes to her rights as a daughter, wife, friend, daughter-in-law, and mother or as a woman. She was always ready to fight back the odds or avenge high handedness and injustice meted out to her modesty. Her character and the fire of revenge inside her can be attributed through the incident whereby she secretly vowed that she won't tie her hair unless she would definitely seek vendetta on the injustice meted out to her. In my opinion, Draupadi is central character to Mahabharata and one can rightfully say that the story revolves around the peripheries of this leading lady. This was another reason of me choosing this character and building a narrative on her.

DRAUPADI'S LAUGHTER AND THE PHRASE 'ANDHE KA PUTRA ANDHA'

Whenever I used to listen to this epic saga, which we refer to as Mahabharata today, I used to watch it with my elders, to be precise with my grandparents. I remember watching Mahabharata numerous times on the television with them. Since, I was passionately involved with this saga,

I used to ask my grandparents “Why did Mahabharata happen at the first stage?”, “Who was the reason for the happening of Mahabharata?” And the answer from the other end was “It is Draupadi who is the reason why the Mahabharata happened.” I used to ask “How, grandpa? Why is she the reason?” And then my grandfather replied “Had she wouldn’t have called Duryodhana “*andhe ka putra Andha*” (which means the blind son of the blind father) the tale of Mahabharata would have never happened.” According to him, this incident triggered Duryodhana and he wanted to take revenge of the insult of his father and him. So, it is not Duryodhana who is responsible but it is indeed Draupadi who is responsible for this war.

This was my first encounter with the character of Draupadi. Then I went and have a conversation with other elder members of the family, my school principal, teachers and some elderly people from the society and everyone told me that “It is Draupadi because of which this war happened.” Some responses which I received were like “*Draupadi ne hastinapur jaisa saamrajya khatam kar diya* (which means Draupadi destroyed the kingdom of Hastinapur). Other responses which I received were that “*Wo aisi aurat hai jisne dada-pote, bhai-bhai, guru-shishya ko ladaya*” (She was such a woman who made grandfather (Bhishma) fight with their grandsons (The Pandavas). She was the reason who made brothers fight (Kauravas and Pandavas) and kill each other. She was the reason who made tutor and students (Guru Dronacharya and Pandavas) fight with each other).

This impression always remained till the time I came to Jindal and understood different perspectives in life. Even before coming to Jindal, I too had pretty much similar impression with the character of Draupadi which were provided by my elders. However, after coming back, I tried to read some literature whether this is true or not. I found that they tried to blame this character and in fact found her to be one of the reasons for the “war of Kurukshetra.” However, in this paper, an attempt is made to “*right the image of Draupadi as wronged through some scriptures, texts and societal perceptions.*”

I would be doing this through use of certain incidents from Mahabharata and adding my own personal insight to it. After careful examination of events, I would like to rectify the image of Draupadi as wronged by the abovementioned texts, scriptures and societal notions. Besides this, I would also be providing how my own personal observations about Draupadi in this piece.

But, before that I would be giving a very brief character sketch and some chain of events revolving around this character of Draupadi.

After receiving such responses from my elders, I was never convinced and in order to understand the truth of this matter, I started reading the original text of Mahabharata and some other regional versions of Mahabharata. After reading Maharishi Ved Vyas' Sanskrit version of Mahabharata, which is also considered as the most important reliant and primary source, we encounter two accounts of this incident. The first incident which is traced in this book is after the happening of Rajasuya Yajna or the Sabha Parva. Another mention of this event is when Duryodhana recollects and narrates this incident to his father, Dhrithrashta. Now, when I read both these incidents, I was totally astonished after reading that there was no mention of Draupadi in Maharishi Vyas' Sanskrit epic in relation to this incident. While encountering with both these incidents from this classic text, I found out that there is never any mention of Draupadi ever insulting Duryodhana by calling him '*Andhe ka putra Andha*'. What becomes pertinent to understand was that there is no mention of Draupadi's name in the whole scene where Duryodhana fell into the pool of water. It was indeed Bhima who laughed first at the happening of this incident along with his three brothers, except Yudhisthira, and his servants. Now, Draupadi's name comes up in the second account when Duryodhana is recollecting this incident to his father. While recollecting this scene, he mentioned that the Pandavas laughed at him and included Draupadi's name along with them. Even while recollecting this event to his father, Duryodhana never pointed out anywhere that Draupadi used one such phrase and in fact, in the whole of Vyas' Mahabharata classic, there is clearly nowhere any mention of the phrase '*Andhe ka putra Andha*'.

Now, I tried to find out the origin of this 'lie' and I would like to provide some background to that as well. It is pertinent to note that Mahabharata, being an epic, has been retold numerous times over the past few centuries. Now, various retellers while narrating this epic saga has come up with their own creative versions and henceforth creative liberties and turns can be witnessed in their works. But, one needs to understand that Vyas' version of original Mahabharata need not be confused with these retellings as there is no reasonable nexus between the two. These retellings cannot be confused in any manner with the Vyas' version.

Now, let me tell you how people, like my grandfather and others in the society, would have taken and made married with the stance that it was Draupadi because of which Mahabharata happened. Now, the text of Vyas' is written in Sanskrit and at that point of time, Sanskrit was not a language which was easily accessible to every section of the strata. Now, it is also important to note at that point of time, the only creative work which the artists can take and make reference was Vyas' version of Mahabharata. So, in order to make the tale of Mahabharata accessible to the masses, various regional writers started translating the Sanskrit text but besides translating the ancient text, they also started re-writing Mahabharata in their own regional languages and with their own interpretations. They started writing it in a very plain and simple language which is easier for the people to grab the essence of Mahabharata and they started doing it in the form of writing stories, plays, poetries etc. This was happening during the period of 9th and 10th century AD. Now, in order to make the tale interesting and exciting for the common population, the regional writers started coming up with their own versions of sensational stories. Some of the examples of such retellings which can be traced from those times are inclusive of Villiparatam (Villi's Bharatam) which was written by Villiputturaar in Tamil language, Kumar Vyas', which is a different personality than Ved Vyas, came up with his own Mahabharata version in Kannada, Sarala Das' Mahabharata in Oriya, Kashiram Das' version of Mahabharata in Bengali and many more. It is important to note that during this period, all these retellings were the ones which were actually identified by various regional writers who wrote them and not as Ved Vyas' Mahabharata. Second, important thing to note and understand here is that Mahabharata in most languages is available in two categories. First category is the '*unabridged*' translation of Ved Vyas' epic from Sanskrit into other regional languages whereas the second category is the '*abridged*' retellings of Mahabharata which happened in the form of plays, poetries, folk songs and many more. In order to make it clear, I would like to substantiate my abovementioned stance with some examples. Let's take the example of Mahabharata in Bengali language. Now, in the Bengali Mahabharata, we see these two categories very much present. Kaliprasanna Singha's translation of the original Sanskrit text, which is a word to word direct translation and is in unabridged form, is present till date in Bengal. Bengali Mahabharata is also available in abridged form. Kashiram Das' Mahabharata, which was written during the 15th century AD in poetry form with various creative stories of the author himself, is considered to be the abridged

form. Now, there are various other retellings which we see from the work of various authors in Bengal like Sanjay, Kavi etc.

Now, these authors by giving their own flavors tend to dilute the original tale in itself. So, coming back to the question whether it was Draupadi because of which this battle of Kurukshetra took place or not, it is pertinent to note that under the original Vyas' text, we don't see any trace of any such event happening where Duryodhana was insulted by Draupadi. It was indeed the four Pandavas i.e. Bhima, Arjuna, Nakul and Sahdeva along with their servants who laughed at Duryodhana and even they didn't utter the phrase 'andhe ka putra Andha'. Draupadi's laughter was something which was never mentioned in the original scene but it came about when Duryodhana narrated the incident to his father much later.

Now, it becomes pertinent to understand the origin of this laughter which today made Draupadi the character that was responsible for Mahabharata in the eyes of several people in the society like my grandparents, teachers etc. Draupadi's laughter was first highlighted in the work of Villiputturaar during the fourteenth century. His 'famous' work in Tamil made Draupadi responsible for the epic battle which took place between the Pandavas and Kauravas when in the original text it was Bhima who laughed the loudest and Draupadi's presence in this very scene hence becomes a question to debate upon. In my view, since in the original text of Ved Vyas', Draupadi's laughter was never mentioned, I strongly feel that the Tamil author derived his 'inspiration' from earlier retellers whereby from one author, other author drew their inspirations and kept on demeaning the character of Draupadi and this is how it would have spread.

The phrase 'Andhe ka putra Andha' was one such phrase which could be considered as the development from this incident by some different author later on. This incident really became popular though from the play 'Andha Yug' which was directed by Dharmveer Bharti and was further published in Dharm Yuga during the year 1954 in Hindi and from here, various authors like Shivaji Sawant who is the writer of 'Mrityunjay', various directors like B.R. Chopra etc. drew their inspirations upon and later on, these abridged form of Mahabharata started making rounds in almost every house of an Indian through TV serials and fictional books. When I hear today from most of the people around me and when I read that the opinion of most of the Indians is that Draupadi was righteously taught the 'lesson' for humiliating Duryodhana, I just

can't stop thinking of their foolishness because the truth of the matter is that such immature comments are transpired from some retellers and TV shows and this shows that they are far away from the reality and truth of what actually happened with Mahabharata.

KARNA'S REJECTION

Now, another incident for which Draupadi is criticized by many is because she rejected Karna. Even a lot of people told me and while reading for this narrative, I realised that there were a bunch of authors who criticized Draupadi because according to them the sole reason for the rejection of Karna by Draupadi is attributed to the fact that he belongs to a lower caste. But, very seldom people know that Draupadi's whole rejection drama is actually a later interpolation or addition to the text of Mahabharata. However, something which is important to know is that in reality it was either Karna failed to hit the target in the Swayamvara or he didn't participated in the Swayamvara at all. Something which is not known to many individuals is that the story of Mahabharata has been developed and has endless versions now which clearly show us that these endless versions were later additions to Vyas' original text of Mahabharata. It is pertinent to note that out of the 1259 manuscripts of Mahabharata present till date, hardly six of the Devanagiri scriptures mention about the rejection of Karna by Draupadi in the Swayamvara. However, in other form of manuscripts and scriptures, it has been mentioned either that Karna failed to hit the target of the fish or Krishna stopping him from participating him in the Swayamvara because only the royal prince and kings were allowed to participate in the Swayamvara.

Also, the instance of Draupadi rejecting Karna first appeared in the commentary of Neelkanth. Now, Neelkanth's commentary is also considered as the source through which many translations of Mahabharata have emerged. Some of these translations which have emerged from Neelkanth's commentary are KMG and from these translations, there were emergence of various novels like Shivaji Sawant's Mrityunjay and catena of television serials like BR Chopra's Mahabharata were inspired from them. Now, this is the reason why people tend to consider that Draupadi insulted Karna which does not find its place anywhere in original Sanskrit text.

DRAUPADI BEING A CHARACTERLESS WOMAN AND A PROSTITUTE

Another reason for which the character of Draupadi is criticized is because of the fact that she was the wife of 5 Pandavas and did not give the character the respect which she deserves. I have indeed seen this in my friend circle when my friend's girlfriend cheated on my friend, some of my friends used to compare the character of Draupadi and all women in general to be of a woman who sleeps with more than one individual. Even I have seen in the society where I live in that when a married lady is found to be having an illicit relationship with another man, then people call her a characterless lady and have the tendency of comparing that lady with Draupadi.

This seems totally unfair to me. A girl cheating on her boyfriend or a married woman entering into an illicit relationship with another man definitely seem wrong, unethical and demeaning but it does not give anywhere give the right to the people who are living in the society to compare it with someone like Draupadi who was an epitome of sacrifice and dignity. In my opinion, people don't give Draupadi that respect could be because of the fact that she had five husbands and this speaks of the dirty and demeaning attitude, sick mentality and lack of education of the people in the society that any woman who has more than one husband is considered as a woman of bad character.

However, it becomes pertinent to understand that same individuals who are living in this society love and applaud Krishna, Arjuna and Bhima who entered into a polyandrous marriage. Lord Krishna who is considered as the most loved character in Indian mythology himself had atleast eight wives, if not sixteen thousand. Arjuna despite being married to Draupadi further entered into a polyandrous marriage with Ulupi, Chitrangada and Subhadra whereas Bhima on the other hand married Hidimba. Now, when people lovingly applaud the characters of Krishna, Arjuna and Bhima and criticize Draupadi and see elements of prostitution, then this just shows the double standards of the people living in society. These double standards are attributed because of factors like lack of education, wrong information and patriarchal norms which are embedded in the society.

THE ACTUAL REASON OF WAR

Now, as pointed earlier in the paper, a lot of people consider Draupadi as the actual reason for which this war happened but this does not seem true. Any sane individual who has some decent knowledge in Mahabharata and some amount of common sense would logically know that no war in this world which is fought and involves billions of lives could solely be fought over women. No matter how beautiful that woman is, still no one would sacrifice billions of lives of their relatives and soldiers just for a woman. It is true that the woman could be an accelerator or the one who could have triggered it, but she can never be the sole reason. If we will look at all the great wars which have been fought over times, we will see that all those wars have been fought over kingdom, throne and power and the war of Kurukshetra was no different.

There is no iota of doubt that Draupadi didn't wanted war but she was not the only one who didn't wanted war. There were many people who wanted this war to happen, Duryodhana and Shakuni were the prominent ones in this list. Now, though Draupadi wanted war but that does not mean that she was the only one who was responsible for such massive scale destruction. Now, calling her the sole reason for this destruction would mean two things in my opinion. First, that the lady was a superwoman who single handedly changed the minds and further destiny of these many intelligent individuals like Bhisma, Guru Dronacharya, and Vidur etc. just merely by crying and taunting. The second reason which I see is that people who are calling Draupadi and blaming her for this war are the ones who are illogical fools.

A very plain reading through the real text of Mahabharata, which is also the only authentic translation, would reveal us the truth which is that, the war of Kurukshetra was less about Draupadi's humiliation and more about power struggle. It is also to note that half of Mahabharata which people think they are well versed with is actually an interpolation and diluted version.

DRAUPADI'S SHARP TONGUE

While interacting with lot of people in order to understand the character of Draupadi which these people have in their mind, I saw that most of the people consider Draupadi who has a

sharp tongue and who didn't give a thought before what she speaks. Even in day to day lives, I have seen and this has been used in various movies that a girl who has a sharp tongue and didn't give a thought before what she speaks is compared to Draupadi as "*Is Ladki ki zubaan toh Draupadi ki tarah chalti hai. Kuch sochti hi nahi hai bolne se pehle*" (which means that this girl speaks like Draupadi and she never thinks before what she speaks).

The reason for people's belief in the abovementioned stance is attributed because of the fact that Draupadi insulted people without any reason. Now, this seems very absolutely bizarre, fake and wrong when people make such a claim because as pointed out in my first segment that insult of Duryodhana and rejection of Karna are concocted stories which were later additions in Mahabharata. My personal observation with this character is that one would only find Draupadi screaming, shouting, arguing or fighting is only when she was assaulted and insulted. Some of the instances where she was insulted and assaulted were during the Vastraharan or when Jayadrath kidnapped her or when Keechak tried to force himself upon her. It is pertinent to note that even while engaging into an argument with Yudhishthira, she never took the harsh approach but she always relied on philosophical route to question her husband and this is very popularly portrayed in the original Ved Vyas' Mahabharata. When we try to dissect the character of Draupadi, we very clearly see that she was considered to be pretty well-mannered and decent lady as it was expected from any empress during those times.

CONCLUSION

To conclude and finally answering the question, I strongly feel that the righteousness and greatness of any character is totally a subjective phenomenon as different traits appeal to different individuals. For example, the boldness of Draupadi for some becomes a reason to dislike her personality while for others it becomes a reason for worship. Having said that, I though won't support the proposition of shaming Draupadi's character on account of the abovementioned propositions which are made in this paper. I strongly feel that people should first try to clear and broaden their minds and should develop their knowledge by reading the right sources instead of merely relying on retellings.

For the people who feel that Draupadi was the sole reason for which the war of Mahabharata was fought, they should go back to the original text of Ved Vyas' Mahabharata whereby it is provided very clearly in the text that both Karna and Duryodhana, each on different occasions, have actually appreciated Draupadi not once but twice and they also regretted for their behavior of what happened during the game of dice towards the end. For the people who have a misconception that Duryodhana and Karna major aggression and hatred was towards Draupadi, they should go back to the text and take a note that the major aggression of both these personalities had always been towards the Pandavas and not against Draupadi which is clearly mentioned by them on several occasions and the evidence of which can be traced from the original text of Mahabharata.

The tale of Mahabharata indeed shows the success of this character who was born unwanted i.e., outside the wishes of her parents where her parents always asked for the son and got her "accidentally and by surprise", who was forced to be a part of an institution of polyandrous marriage, further who was insulted in the courtroom full of different subjects. Her character shows that she seems to have a profound awareness of being an instrument in bringing about the extinction of an effete epoch so that a new age could take birth and being so aware of this, Draupadi offered her entire being as a flaming sacrifice in that holocaust of which her brother cum friend Krishna was the presiding deity.

Through this paper, we actually have tried to dissect different layers of Mahabharata where if this epic tale is an intricately woven saga of hatred and love, bloodshed and noble thoughts, 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 describes. It is pertinent to note that this remarkable "virgin", who was gifted that she will always remain virgin, never demanded anything for herself except for dignity and self-respect. Her self-respect can actually be construed from the event after Cheerharan incident when Dhrithrashta promised her to fulfill 'any' of her 3 wishes after the cheer-haran incident, she just asked for two boon which shows of her striking dignity.

REFERENCES

For this narrative, I have basically relied on three primary sources and in order to verify the abovementioned facts, one can refer to Kishori Mohan Ganguly's Mahabharata which is the English translation or Gita Press Edition in Hindi or BORI's critical edition of Mahabharata. In order to refer and verify certain excerpts which I shared from Vyas's Sanskrit text, one in order to justify the veracity of those claims made can have a look at Amrita T's answer to How should have Duryodhan reacted when Drauadi laughed at him? Besides this, I have also relied on the abridged version of different authors which I mentioned in the course of this narrative.

Footnotes:

- 1.) Kishori Mohan Ganguly's English translation of Mahabharat: Sacred-Texts: Hinduism
- 2.) The Critical Edition of Mahabharat, BORI, translated in English by Bibek Debroy.
- 3.) The Cult of Draupadi, Vol I by Alf Hiltebeitel.