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Suhana PA
Assistant Professor, M E S
Arts and Science College,
Perintalmanna, Kerala, India

Acceptance, resistance and revenge: Draupadi in Contemporary Indian Fiction

Suhana PA

Abstract

In Hindu Mythology few women stand out as Draupadi, the most complex and interesting character in Mahabharatha. In the contemporary trend of reinterpreting mythology in Indian literature, Draupadi too became the central character of many novels. This paper attempts to study three different reinterpretations of Mahabharatha with Draupadi as the central character – Ini Njan Urangatte by P.K. Balakrishnan, Yajnaseni by Prathibha Ray and The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee and examines how the portrayal of Draupadi in these works were influenced by the accepted notions of womanhood of the respective periods in which they were written

Keywords: Acceptance, resistance, revenge, Draupadi, patriarchal notions of womanhood

1. Introduction

In Indian mythology few women characters stand out like Draupadi. A very complex and interesting character of the epic, Draupadi has always been the subject of innumerable controversies. She is a heroine who is unpredictable, unwavering and who could also possess the austerity of a traditional Hindu wife. She is often treated as a *kriya* who brought about the great Kurukshetra war and thereby *yuganta*. She is also one among the *panchakanyas* whose names are chanted to redeem one's sins. She was the most beautiful woman of her period. She was unique, being the wife of five men at a time – the five greatest warriors of the period, the Pandavas. She was an ideal wife who followed her husbands in all their predicaments. Yet she was subjected to great atrocities all through her life. She was staked by her husband in a game of dice and lost. She was insulted and disrobed following this in the Kauravasabha where all the elders and her husbands remained passive witnesses. She questioned the injustice she suffered and pledged vengeance against the Kaurava clan which was fulfilled by the war. She suffered thirteen years of exile with her husbands waiting for the war. But the war failed to bring happiness to her and she lost all her children, her father and her brother. In their last journey too she followed her husbands but died all alone in the Himalayan slopes with none of her husbands to take care of her, best explained in the words *nathavathi anathavathi*. Myths have always influenced writers in all languages and the reinterpretation of myths is a very vibrant trend in contemporary Indian literature. Many writers have reinterpreted the epics through the eyes of characters whose voices are not given importance in the epics. There were also attempts to reinterpret Mahabharatha through the eyes of Draupadi. Is an important novel in Malayalam by P.K. Balakrishnan in which he retells the Mahabharatha through Draupadi. The novel begins after the Kurukshetra war and all the incidents are recollected by Draupadi as she listens to other characters like Kunti, Sanjaya and Krishna. Although these narrations focus on the character of Karna, Draupadi voices her thoughts and reflections as well in the process. The novelist mainly focuses on the mother and wife in Draupadi. Draupadi in the novel accepts all the injustices she had to suffer as her fate. She as portrayed in the novel gives great importance to the patriarchal definitions of a woman as a daughter, wife and mother and tries to fulfill them. All through her life she was an ideal wife loving her husband's blindly. But the very idea of Draupadi being a wife is problematic as she does not fit into the general concept of a wife. She wonders whether she who has five husbands can actually be called a wife. She wonders Whether she is actually loved and protected by anyone. She also reflects how Karna has saved her from being a widow as he left all her husband's alive even though he had all the

Correspondence
Suhana PA
Assistant Professor, M E S
Arts and Science College,
Perintalmanna, Kerala, India

chances to kill them, fulfilling his promise to Kunti. The idea of widowhood is again problematic. She cannot actually become a widow if one of her husband's dies as she remains the wife of the other brothers. Thus her existence cannot be explained in such simple terms. Her life is very similar to the life of her mother-in-law Kunti who had children from four different men and married another man. "The single wife of the five sons of different fathers born to a single mother, Draupadi, fate has been creating a comic story with your's and Kunti's life." (Balakrishnan 211)

She realises in the end that her husbands never loved her enough to forget their dharma when she was wronged. They always had other priorities compared to which she was of lesser importance. For Yudhishtira, the only reason for war was to regain the country which was rightly meant for him in a way suitable for a kshatriya. Crimes which man can never forgive – crimes committed against Draupadi were never reasons to lead Yudhishtira to war. Draupadi had no place in his mind or in the minds of Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula or Sahadeva as they discussed peace. Even when the war came to an end – with the death of all dear people who fought for the Pandavas and the death of their sons, Draupadi's sorrow remained her sorrow alone. Yudhishtira grieved the death of his brother Karna alone. Arjuna was able to cut the right hand of Bhurisravas when he was trying to kill Satyaki holding his hair, forgetting the laws of war. But the same Arjuna did not hear the laments of Draupadi as she was dragged by her hair and stripped publicly in the court of Hastinapura. Bhima, who was able to kill Duryodhana by striking his thighs against the laws of war, also could not forget Dharma then. Dharmaja, who killed his Guru lying "Aswathama hatha:" to Drona also remained true to Dharma then. None of her husbands raised a single voice against the atrocities committed against her. She felt that she had been in a beautiful delirium all her life drowned in her love for her husbands. Her husbands did not love her enough to take revenge on those who wronged her. It was only Krishna who was there to help her. She was not able to live in her beautiful dream of being the darling of the five great heroes of the world. She wondered whether Karna would have reacted the same way if his dear wife was disrobed in the public. She also wondered whether Arjuna would have reacted the same way if it was Subhadra in her place. In her attempts to become the ideal wife, she failed to become the mother of her children which she realises only after their death. She followed her husbands into exile without thinking about them. During the days of exile too she did not yearn for them. They grew up away from her and she was never sorry for it. After their death she was not even able to recollect how they looked like. She felt ashamed to call herself their mother and was haunted by guilt. When her mother in law, Kunti lived in her love for her children, Draupadi was never able to love her children. Instead of protecting them she made them fight in the war and lost them forever. "A woman is a wife. A woman is a mother. She had abandoned her motherhood. Her husbands, who were heroes, abandoned the wife in her for years. Now she had reduced into a bag of broken crystal pieces (215)." Ini Njan Urangatte, was published in 1973, a period when feminist thought was not so dominant in Indian literature. Also the fact that the novel is written by a male novelist in a female perspective is to be considered along with it. The novel mainly focuses on two aspects of Draupadi's life which is very complex and multifaceted. Considering these

roles as a mother and wife, it can be noted that they are portrayed within the very traditional ideas of patriarchy where a woman is expected to perform her roles of a perfect daughter, a perfect wife and a perfect mother. Draupadi feels her life has come to nothing as she was not able to fulfil these roles. All the other aspects of her eventful life are not considered by the novelist. We find the Draupadi in the novel accepting whatever fate has brought her and never questioning anything until the war. Even though things change with the war her thoughts are still governed by the notions of being a wife and a mother. Yajnaseni by Prathibha Ray, a great writer in Odisha and Jnapiith award winner provides a psychological approach to the character of Draupadi. Ray, as in her other novels, redefines the roles and defining parameters of women in Yajnaseni too. An epistolary novel in which the story unveils through a letter written by Draupadi to Krishna as she lies dying in the Himalayas, the novelist gives voice to the inner thoughts and resentments of Draupadi in various stages of her life. The author remarks: "Draupadi is a challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power. Such a woman – who has faced torment, insult, mental and emotional drama like Yajnaseni Draupadi – has not been born on this earth" (Ray 400)

Unlike the submissive Draupadi in Ini Njan Urangatte, Yajnaseni portrays an intelligent and bold woman who is well aware of the ways in which others use her for their own needs. She resists these injustices by questioning them but finally succumbs accepting all of it as her duty. Draupadi's thoughts are revealed through the letter she writes to Krishna as she lay dying in the Himalayas. None of her husband's came to help her as she fell in their last journey and Yudhishtira asks the brothers not to turn back. The letter begins with the idea "How false is this bond between husband and wife! Affection, love, sacrifice and surrender!" (3). ".....My five husbands, whom I had regarded even as my five senses all through life and who had been my companions in life after life, did not even look back. They kept walking straight ahead on the path to svarg. I was alone at death's door...! (Ray 393) As the daughter of King Drupad, Draupadi is a conscious and alert character. Many injustices done to her during her role of a daughter are revealed here by sighting many instances. Soon after her birth from the fire her father named her Krishnaa and offered her to Krishna. Draupadi is delighted by the thought of becoming the wife of Krishna. But Krishna asks Drupada to conduct a swayamvara for Draupadi and asks her to marry his friend Arjuna, the greatest warrior of Aryavat. She had no right to take decisions in her own life. As a daughter she was always bound to protect her father's dharma. She was hurt by the idea of displaying herself as a gift for game in front of the lustful eyes of many men on the day of swayamvara. When she asks her brother how she would marry the Brahmin youth when she is already betrothed to Arjuna in her mind, he tells her that father's dharma is daughter's dharma and she has to honour her father's vow being a dutiful daughter. She is much disturbed by the thought that "even if my dharma was destroyed my father's dharma must be preserved" (46). Her situation is not much changed in her husband's household. Her mother in law asked her sons to divide her amongst the five brothers which was more than any other shock for her. Listening to the Yudhishtira's call that they had brought a priceless object she detested the word 'object'. She was well aware that her

father, her brother and her husband were all treating her as an object. All the five brothers were ready to marry her. She wondered whether she did not have any say in such matters. She wondered about the purpose of swayamvara if this was to happen. "Why should I silently bear such an insult? Was I a lifeless statue...would these brothers impose upon me their whimsical authority and should I accept that?"(56). She was so furious with her husband as he accepted the decision that she wanted to turn into a searing flame of sacrificial fire and destroy the world and the five brothers in it. In her married life she was the wife of five husbands but no one was there to take care of her. On the contrary as an ideal wife it was her duty to take care of them all. She thought: "But what about me? If a woman was learned or wise did no one think of her? Was there no affection, sympathy, for her in anyone? Was she stone, a lifeless piece of sculpture?"(170). During the vastraharan episode when Duryodhana commanded her to appear in the assembly hall she very calmly questioned whether she was staked after her husband staked himself and lost. She did not accept any command from anyone easily. Full of anger and anguish she thought how Yudhishtira, the Dharmaraja could stake his wife. "Was woman merely men's movable or immovable property? Being a woman did I not have right even over myself, my soul? If they had the rights over this body of mine, did it mean that they could do as they wished with me?"(235). No one questioned Dushasana as he dragged her into the assembly hall and tried to strip her. When Shakuni commented that she was suffering because she was learned and scholarly and that ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman because in such a condition she could grovel at the feet and beg what she wished, Draupadi replies that "I do not beg for any one's pity. I demand justice. To protect the honour of women is the dharma of a king"(238). She is portrayed as an intelligent woman capable of questioning the wrongs committed against her and wish to resist them. The novelist focused on the wife and Krisnabhakt in Draupadi. Unlike Ini Njan Urangatte the novel gives little importance to the mother in Draupadi. Draupadi in Yajnaseni is capable of resisting at the psychological level at least even though not in action. She reflects the changes in perception of womanhood in the 1980s, the period in which the novel was written. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in her novel *The Palace of Illusions* portrays Draupadi as a modern woman, a new woman. She seems to belong to the period in which the novel was written rather than the period of the epic. Divakaruni's Draupadi is an independent, rebellious and fiery woman with a streak of stubbornness, who thinks for herself and protests against all injustices she has to suffer. The novelist gives greater importance to the life of Draupadi before her marriage unlike the other two novelists. She is more aggressive than the Draupadi in Yajnaseni. She was constantly aware how her actions would one day change the course of history. She considers herself as the specially chosen. She made Dhairya repeat the story of her birth to assert to herself the importance of her birth. She feels alienated in her palace as no one else other than Dhairya and Dhairya Ma talked to her. Dhairya and Krishna were her only friends. Dhairya and herself shared a special bond being born from fire together. Her dark skin too adds to the sense of alienation she felt in the presence of others. Full of self-doubts about her outward appearance which radically deviates from the ideal of 'fair' woman, she asks Krishna "if he thought that a princess afflicted with a

skin so dark that people termed it blue was capable of changing history" (Divakaruni 8). This testifies to an awareness of a double marginality, an inequality felt by the heroine both in terms of gender and colour. But one day suddenly she realizes the power of her beauty and learns to use its power on the people around her. She never has a good relationship with her father in the novel. Unlike other women in the palace, she was interested in learning texts and preachings taught by a tutor who came to teach her brother. Her inquisitiveness and her hunger to learn moved her in the path of education. Draupadi one day learns from her sairindhri about a sage who tells about the future. With Dhairya Ma she visits him and learns about her future. The prophecies the spirits made were too much for her. She wanted to change history but she did not want to become the cause of the war that will cause yuganta. She did not want to bring about the death of her father and brother. She was fascinated about the idea of the palace she would own and lose. She begins to connect all her dreams with the idea of the beautiful palace she is to own. She dreams her palace to be everything her father's palace was not. After marriage she does succeed in being the queen of the palace of her dreams – the palace of illusions. She identified herself very much as the proud owner of the great palace ever. She forgot the disappointments she had in her married life as she enjoyed her palace. Krishna warns her not to identify too much with palace but she never listens. When Yudhishtira loses the palace too in the game of dice a part of Draupadi is also lost forever. She was not able to afford her loss and this was multiplied by the insult she faced in Kauravasabha. During the vastraharan episode, the most private space of womanhood was encroached and the silence of the royal members present in the court as well as the paralysed reactions of her husbands ignited her fury. Consumed by her anger and desire to regain her lost dignity, she propounded the fatal and dreadful curse of war. She pledges to take revenge on the Kauravas who insulted her and deprived her of her beloved palace. During the period of exile, she constantly reminds her husbands of the insult in fiery language. Divakaruni also introduces an imaginary love story between Karna and Draupadi which forms an important aspect of her narration. She falls in love with Karna the moment she sets her eyes on his statue. Arjuna was not of any interest for her. At the time of swayamvara in order to save her brother's life, Draupadi forsook her amorous feelings towards Karna and rejects him as his parenthood was in question and he developed enmity towards her. But even after her marriage with Pandavas she was not able to forget Karna and regretted her decision all along her life. She was actually forced to choose Arjuna as her husband. She felt: "Now my mouth filled with ashes. How foolish I'd been, dreaming of love when I was nothing but a worm dangled at the end of a fishing pole" (57). Her marriage was only a process to strengthen her father's political situation. All through her life she compared her husbands with Karna. Draupadi in the novel also faces crisis of an unstable selfhood. It seemed that everything I'd lived until now had been a role. The princess who longed for acceptance, the guilty girl whose heart wouldn't listen, the wife who balanced her fivefold role precariously, the rebellious daughter-in-law, the queen who ruled the most magical of palaces, the distracted mother, the beloved companion of Krishna, who refused to learn the lessons he offered, the woman obsessed with vengeance-none of them

were the true Panchali.(229) Divakaruni portrays Draupadi as model of female empowerment and courage trying to break free from the shackles of patriarchal hegemony. As Linder Elsbeth states: Divakaruni has taken a male-centered story and breathed new life into its female characters, giving us a rich tale of passion and love, power and weakness, honour and humiliation. Whether or not readers are familiar with the epic, still fascinating and several millennia on, they will enjoy this entertaining, insightful and suspenseful story.(Elsbeth 42). Divakaruni do not romanticise the roles of wife and motherhood in her novel like P.K. Balakrishnan. The portrayal of Draupadi in the three novels seems to reflect the idea of womanhood of the period in which these works were written. Draupadi in Ini Njan Urangatte written by a man fits more perfectly to the patriarchal notions of womanhood compared to the other two novels written by women writers. Draupadi was a very submissive woman who limited herself to the roles assigned to her, Draupadi in Yajnaseni of 1984 was far more daring in that she questioned the injustices committed against her and also voiced her stand very clearly. She was able to assert herself in her thoughts even if not in action like the Draupadi in The Palace of Illusions. In The Palace of Illusions of 2008 Draupadi is a modern woman, independent, stubborn, rebellious and even aggressive at times and also is tormented by the question of her selfhood.

The enigmatic character of Draupadi can create more and more versions of herself. Both a great symbol of female suffering as well as an early feminist, Draupadi is a complex character who can be read anew each generation according to the prevailing sensibilities and ideologies of the time. Indian writers down the centuries have engaged with her character and role in a way in which they have not engaged with Sita. The novels analysed here are only three example of a contemporary treatment in the complex character of Draupadi and the fact that her role in the epic provides endless opportunity for reinterpretation means that they certainly will not be the last.

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