



Draupadi, the Unsung Heroine of Classical Epoch

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ABSTRACT

Epic literary tradition portrayed great heroines like Savitri, Draupadi, Shakuntala, Sita, etc. who underwent difficult trials and tribulations to prove their chastity. Among all of them Sita is always considered as a role model for Indian women. She is the heroine who is part and parcel of Indian hearts and lives even today. One can find her references in all the religious and domestic roles expected to be followed by women. In sharp contrast to her, one will find hardly any reference of Draupadi as a role model for women. She was and is still the unsung heroine of Indian epic tradition. She is considered as an early feminist who questioned the role and the dharma prescribed to her by the male dominated society. In this research paper we will focus on Draupadi's unaccepted behaviour within the patriarchal society. She remained unacknowledged because unlike Sita she revolted against the accepted social code and order. In order to highlight the unconventional behaviour of Draupadi, initially this paper will explore major episodes revolving around her life. Then the paper will focus upon Sita and Draupadi's different understanding of the world of which they were a part. One would see two different female attitudes towards the patriarchal society.

KEYWORDS :

The Hindu tradition conditioned the women of the epics to obey their husbands and to be chaste. If they didn't follow the tradition they were considered as outcast. So, their dharma was to prove their chastity. Epic literary tradition portrayed great heroines like Savitri, Draupadi, Shakuntala, Sita, etc. who underwent difficult trials and tribulations to prove their chastity. Among all of them Sita is always considered as a role model for Indian women. She is the heroine who is part and parcel of Indian hearts and lives even today. One can find her references in all the religious and domestic roles expected to be followed by women. In sharp contrast to her, one will find hardly any reference of Draupadi as a role model for women. She was and is still the unsung heroine of Indian epic tradition. She is considered as an early feminist who questioned the role and the dharma prescribed to her by the male dominated society. She was one who created an identity for herself without the support from her husbands. In this research paper we will focus on Draupadi's unaccepted behaviour within the patriarchal society. She remained unacknowledged because unlike Sita she revolted against the accepted social code and order. In order to highlight the unconventional behaviour of Draupadi, initially this paper will explore major episodes revolving around her life. Then the paper will focus upon Sita and Draupadi's different understanding of the world of which they were a part. One would see two different female attitudes towards the patriarchal society. Though both were from the same belief system, they sustained the pressures of life in different ways.

If one looks back at the unusual birth of Draupadi as a yonija-sambhava (which means one who is not born out of woman) one can understand her unsubmitive spirit since the beginning.

The princess from Pancala rose up from the Middle of the sacrificial fire. She was beautiful and enchanting; she had a lovely body and a waist the shape of the sacrificial altar. She was dark, had eyes like lotus leaves, and dark, wavy hair. She was a goddess who had taken on a human form. Her scent, like that of a blue lotus, perfumed the air for the distance of a mile. (Sutherland 64)

She represented fire which symbolised illumination which would actually enlighten even the wisest of men in the following years of her life. Draupadi emerged from fire to king Drupada who had performed a ritual for a son in order to kill Drona. But to his dismay a daughter was born. After her birth there was a premonition from the heaven indicating that she would become the destroyer of the Kshatriya's (the warrior class) clan. In the epic Draupadi was first seen at her *Swayamvara* (wedding contest) being performed at an assembly hall where she had to choose her life partner. Here any rebellious characteristic of Draupadi is not being reflected, but the clichéd reflection of her beauty and character is described: "She possessed the most beautiful figure: none was her equal on earth" (Sutherland 64). One cannot see

any trait of individuality in this description but a conventional appreciation of her physical beauty. It is only later in the epic that we see the reflection of individuality and unconventional temperament of Draupadi coming out.

The major turn in Draupadi's life and outlook was seen during the dicing game being played between Pandavas and Kauravas. Till now she was depicted as a stereotypical wife who was an epitome of traditional women. It was only during this scene her complex character was more fully developed which made her different from a passive wife and a woman. She was delineated as a strong and rebellious female who stood apart from other females. During the dicing match Yudhishthira (eldest brother of Pandavas) had put all his land, villages, properties, jewels etc. at stake. After losing all his possessions he gambled his brothers in order to win back his empire and lost them also. In his attempt to somehow win the game he kept Draupadi at stake, describing her as a valuable asset for his rivals:

I will stake her- whose eyes and fragrance are like autumnal lotuses. Attached to modesty, she is, in beauty, equal to Sri, the goddess of beauty. Were a man to desire a woman, she would be like this one, on account of her kindness; she would be like this one, on account of her beautiful figure; she would be like this one on account of her perfect character. (Sutherland 65)

After the rolling of dice for the last time, Yudhishthira lost his ownership of Draupadi. It was after this loss Draupadi was dragged into the court by Dushasana (one of the Kauravas): "Dressed in only one garment, which had its ends (tied) low, and menstruating, she entered the assembly. The woman from Pancala went before her father-in-law (Dhritarastra)" (Sutherland 65)

This was the climax of the epic wherein we see the character of Draupadi being fully developed. Dushasana to his dismay tried to pull off her only garment, but he was unable to remove it. It was a miracle played by God Krishna and this was how Draupadi was saved from embarrassment in front of the entire court. She was disgraced and in her anger she started questioning the entire court. Unlike a docile wife, she here came out of her stereotypical role and took the onus of reminding all the elders, Kauravas and her husbands the true meaning of Dharama. As Bimal Krishna Matilal rightly comments on her unconventional reaction: "Draupadi had presence of mind and fearlessness even during calamities. She could rebuke and threaten the Kauravas, Jayadratha and Kicaka for molesting her and was bold enough to argue with the members of the assemblies of the Kurus and also Virata" (143). As Sutherland also remarks, "The episode is ironic, though. During the scene we are made aware that the beautiful Draupadi is possessed also of quick wit and a clever tongue. Her ability at debate is soon demonstrated, and at the conclusion of the

episode, we realise that her wit has saved her from impending slavery" (67). Draupadi also had good knowledge on politics and that is why Pandavas often sought her advice and trusted her decision. It was in Draupadi's nature to defeat any misfortune unlike the protagonists of other epics. Here her character turns out to be the most powerful among other women characters like Sita in Ramayana, Sakuntala in Abhinajana Sakuntalam. Within this patriarchal society, she was a woman who demanded equal status with men. Bhawalkar in his work aptly commented on Draupadi, "Draupadi is 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" (143).

After a lot of humiliation she openly condemned all those who were present there as mute spectators, "How is it that the wife of Pandus, the sister of Parsata, the friend of Vasudeva Krsna, could be brought before the assembly of kings? Tell me whether or not I, King Dharma's wife, born of equal station, am a slave. Then I will do as commanded, Kauravas!" (Sutherland, 66). One realises that this humiliation was not the humiliation of Draupadi but of all the men present there who did not question the wrong act. It was her questioning spirit that actually saved her husbands from slavery. If she had accepted her fate without saying anything Mahabharata would never have happened. Unlike Sita of Ramayana she chose to question the wrongs of male chauvinistic society and that is why she was not considered as an ideal role model for women. Even though they were saved from slavery Draupadi's anger did not subside and she took an oath to take revenge for the injustice and humiliation of her entire family from Kauravas. Although the family was saved from slavery they were expatriated for thirteen years in forest. Even during the exile Draupadi did not forget her ill-treatment at the hands of Kauravas, and her wounded soul did not want to spare Kauravas for their offensive mind and passive attitude of her husbands. She complained to Lord Krsna in front of his assembly during the exile: "I have no husbands, no sons, no brothers, no father, no relatives, not even you, Madhusudana. As if free from all grief, you all stood by while vile men insulted me" (Sutherland, 67). Here we see that Draupadi was vocal, candid and could criticize her husbands in front of others also. It is then Krsna took the onus of revenge on behalf of his friend (Draupadi).

In another important incident Draupadi's outspoken and unconventional behaviour was brought out when during the exile, the Pandavas once left Draupadi at the hermitage of Trnabindu. There Jayadratha casted his sinful eyes over the beautiful Draupadi and kidnapped her. When the Pandavas returned from their trip and came to know about her abduction, they wage a war against Jayadratha. He was defeated and he ran away from the battlefield. Pandavas on the suggestion of Yudhisthira decided not to kill him. On hearing this Draupadi became frantic and questioned the decision of Pandavas thus,

...the clever and faithful Draupadi, her senses agitated, became enraged and humiliated, and she spoke to her two husbands, Bhima and

Arjuna, "If you want to do me a kindness, kill that lowest of humans, that outcast of the Saindhavas, that evil, wretched defiler of his family!" (Sutherland 69)

Although Jayadratha was enslaved by Pandavas after the provocation of Draupadi, Yudhisthira let him free in the name of dharma. Draupadi was not one who could accept anything wrong done to her. She was unlike other traditional women who could not express their anger openly. This nature set her apart from other epic heroines of traditional world. That is why she still remains the unsung heroine of classical literature. These two incidents are mere examples from the epic to highlight her vocal behaviour and aggression which stands in sharp contrast to generally accepted world view that gives relevance to only mute and submissive women like Sita, from Ramayana. She was considered as a commodity by Rama. She was an archetypal wife who followed whatever her husband told her to do. After her abduction by Ravana, the king of Lanka, she had to face fire-trial in order to prove her chastity to her husband, Rama, who instead of showing sympathy and love asked her to do so because his kingdom was raising fingers on her. Uma Chakravarti's analysis is very well summed up in the following lines, "An analysis of [the character of Sita] in the Valmiki Ramayana indicates that the text was a potent instrument for propagating the twin notions that women are the property of men and that sexual fidelity for women was life's major virtue" (71).

Draupadi's different and uncompromising approach differentiate her from others. She had modern approach in handling issues in the era where women were considered to be merely property owned by men: "... grain, livestock, women, all sorts of things and non-precious metals belong to the man who wins them" (Doniger, 61). Thus, her forthright qualities had been summed up by Dr. Bhawalkar as:

Yet 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 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 life are universal and beyond the limit of time and space. (151)

At last, we can see Draupadi as the unrecognised heroine of the past as well as of the contemporary time. But it is quite clear that the male dominated society suppressed such women who could stand for their rights and position. Such bold women may not be acknowledged by the conventional normative society but they stand apart and create an identity for themselves for all times to come. They are like harbinger for change that is very much required to revolutionise the existing system.

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