



Draupadi: India's First Daughter- The Precursor of Indian Feminist Ideology

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Abstract

In *Draupadi: India's First Daughter*, Vamshi Krishna rewrites *Mahabaratha* from the female perspective of queen Draupadi. The candid and interesting first person narration questions the stereotypical notion of women in the Indian culture. The classic, Sanskrit epic poem *Mahabaratha* is the spiritual as well as historical source which have defined the societal values in the aspects of patriarchy. It describes the female characters to be submissive and marginalized in the male dominated society. In the work of Vamshi Krishna the character Draupadi is exemplified as one of the earliest feminists due to her views on society and as well as polyandry and her thirst for revenge to show her individuality. This article proposes to analyse the image of the submissive and passive Draupadi of the epic poem *Mahabaratha* to a strong feminist in the light of Elaine Showalter's theory of feminism.

Keywords: feminism, culture, society, gynocriticism, patriarchy, stereotypes, polyandry and polygamy.

The importance of Epic and myth has always been an influence in the Indian culture and as well as in literature for a very long time. The mythical characters have always created an interest for both readers and writers. In recent years, the emergence of retelling and re-interpretation has become a trend in literature. It has tried to bring out the viewpoints of voiceless in the prewritten text and have influenced many writers in almost all the languages. When it comes to retelling of mythology women's perspective plays the major role rather than the perspective of men. Most of the retelling fiction and novels revolve around the narrations of female characters. It gives voice in the existing patriarchal society. The original epic never attempted to showcase the viewpoints of women characters. This paper attempts to represent the female character Draupadi of the epic *Mahabharata* in the retelling of Vamshi Krishna's *Draupadi: India's First Daughter*. This rereading gives priority to women's assertion, identity, longings, thoughts and their actions.

The women's movements which took place in the early years plays a vital role in today's the feminist literary criticism. In order to get recognition and identity of women in the society and in literature, the contributions of women's writings for women's movements is countless. The most prominent books that include Mary Wollstonecraft's *An Indication to the Rights of Women* (1792), Virginia Wolf's *A Room of one's own* (1929), Simone de Beauvoir's *The second Sex* (1949) and Elaine Showalter's *A literature of their own* (1977). Showalter portrays the indifference to women in patriarchal society, their pursuit for education and substitute for their stereotypical approach. Women's movements in the early stages stresses women to be a writer, reader and the language of their own in the world of male dominant language.

The retellings of feminism are the yield of the dual method of revision. The first method is that it is generated out of the master narrative through diffusion and refraction. The second method is taken largely by feminists that are the act of myth-revision to have an alternative understanding of reality. With this context it is essential to note down that any re-telling is preceded by re-reading. The significant scrutiny on the concept of feminist myth revisioning is made by Susan Sellers in the following lines:

Feminist rewriting could thus include ironic mimicry and clever twists as well as a whole gamut of tactics that would open the myth from the inside as well as out, leaving in place enough of the known format to provide evocative points of reflection for its reader, but also encompassing different possibilities and other points of view (Sellers 29).

Any feminist rewriting of Draupadi's storyline is mostly as a work of myth revisioning that is the matter of interpretative constraints. For a woman retelling as an additional constraint that the patriarchal ideological framework of mythic precedent cannot be distorted or altered. It can only be questioned and exposed paradoxically.

"The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of 'socialization, since it provided role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the 'feminine' and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations" (Barry 117). Feminist rereading of mythology has become popular in literature these days. Writers like Chithra Banarjee Divakaruni, Pratiba Ray, Saiswaroopalyer and Kavita Kane have become well-known in these types of writings. Even male writers like Amish Tripathy, Devdutt Pattanaik and Vamshi Krishna gives voice to the voiceless female characters in their revisioning of mythology.

The mythological tales that we heard almost portrays strong male characters. Those tales shows women as either 'ideal' or 'negative'. They are all portrayed under the cover as mother, wives and vamps. There are few women characters that had the mind of their own, they are Urmila, Sita and Mandodari of the epic *Ramayana* and Hidimba and Draupadi from *Mahabharatha*. The female character Draupadi is born from fire-sacrifice. In Hindu scriptures she is one of the most compassionate and powerful female character. She is fearless, sacrificing and the one who fought for herself to protect her womanhood in the dice game.

In Indian literature there are various narrations of Draupadi by different writers in the perspective of feminism. Such narrations are as follows. The essay "Draupadi" in *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* by Irawthi Karve was originally written in Marathi and translated into English in the year 1967. It tries to portray the revaluation of the *Mahabharatha* from the historical and cultural perspectives. Here the writer compares the character Draupadi with the female character Seeta of the epic *Ramayana*. Karve's narration interrogates Draupadi's point of view in one hand and the masculinist structure of the *Mahabharatha* on the other.

Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" is a collection of short story which was published in Bengali at first and it was translated into English by Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak in 1997. It is one of the most insubordinate retelling of the epic episode of Draupadi's disrobing during the game of dice, Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" gives a devastating collision by transplanting the epic *Mahabharatha* into the postcolonial political framework of the contemporary realm state where the struggle amid the authoritative forces and subjugated castes gets entwined with gender abuse.

Five Lords, Yet None a Protector by Saoli Mitra is a play originally written in Bengali and translated into English in the year 2002. She retells the story of the *Mahabharatha* in order to recover it from the outlook of Draupadi whose personal misfortune connects significant scope in spite of being married to the five strong Kshatriya men. Despite this superfluous of husbands, Draupadi's position as a vulnerable woman is portrayed.

Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi by Pratibha Ray is a novel originally written in Oriya and it was translated into English in the year 1995. Ray revises the story of *Mahabharatha* from Draupadi's viewpoint, whose rethinking of the various incidents and episodes pave way to set up a drastically novel outlook upon the epic character.

ShashiDeshpande's "And What has been Decided?" is a short story in English published in the year 2000, narrates the episodes of Draupadi's life in a way which requires a just and utter portrayals of different scope and aspects of her character. Draupadi is given an important voice which interrogates the demeanor of her husbands who are negligent to her reiterated to seek out payback for her abuse by the Kauravas.

ChithraBanarjeeDivakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a novel in English published in 2008, in this novel Divakaruni portrays Draupadi with a vital role and critical voice, adjoining at times on the sarcastic and even the unrelated, in order to weaken various presumptions of the epic. Ferociously honest, candid, outspoken and feminist in her inclinations, Divakaruni's Draupadi never agree to things at face value without ascertaining their basis and chooses to verbalize her psyche on most issues.

In Vamshi Krishna's *Draupadi: India's First Daughter*, Draupadi recalls her past events while travelling to Swargaloka. She has the features of the head of a matriarchal family.

Was she walking or just dragging her feet with might? She looked like a women who once brimmed with charm, strength, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, love, mercy, compassion, grace, but then gave it up all after getting physically exhausted and mentally drained. (Krishna 13)

She once had the strength to overcome and put up with the various trials of existence. The epic heroin Draupadi is no way lesser than her husbands in courage and strength or bravery and good value. She is an example for a mother in the family, who has continuous sufferings and shame. But she took it everything in her pace and defeated each one of her perpetrators of her embarrassment and distress.

"All five brothers could sense that she had slipped but none bothered to lookback" (Krishna 13). Though she had five husbands in the name of dharma they always ill-treated her. They never wanted to hear her opinion. They finally left her to die in roadside like nothing and her senses got drained. When Bhima asks Yudhishtira why she has to die first, Yudhishtira's reply is "she is dying because she deserves it, she loved Arjuna more than anyone of us, though all five of us are husbands, which is a sin" (Krishna 13). Her femininity is always tested and questioned. A woman cannot do anything on her own then the society will ultimately label it as a sin and does not value her sufferings.

Draupadi becomes the centre of the matriarchal power among her husbands during the time of their exile. She is blessed with an "akshayapatra", the pot which always filled with food by the Lord Dharma Raja and the pot will become empty after the dinner of Draupadi. Here it is noted that Draupadi has to starve many hours in order to feed others. She has to serve her husbands as well as the sages visited them without any prior notice. She has to wait to fulfill her basic need like hunger for the sake of others.

Though she has an emotional jealous upon Subhadhrain the case of Arjuna she shows her love towards everyone. She could not show her anger towards them to maintain peace in family. For this quality of Draupadi, Krishna praises her in the following lines to show the strength of Draupadi. That is, "Draupadi even the men fighting in the war take off their armour and rest after the sunset. But you are a warrior without an armour, relentlessly fighting with your valor as a shield" (Krishna 83).

Her marital life is sternly restricted, requiring huge self control. All her sentiments and feelings wanted an immense deal of modification when she alters her way of life every one year for each husband accordingly. Draupadi suffers from both polyandrous and polygamous relationship. But she manages this fragile relationship with harmony. Her mother in laws Kunti gave birth to her three sons from three different powers and Nakula and Sahadeva belongs to Madri, the second wife of Pandu. It is Draupadi who protected a peace in brotherhood and unity by playing the role like a catalyst among five brothers.

The society had never questioned any men who have polygamous relationship in the myth. It has been covered with so many reasons like power and for kinship a man can marry as many wives as possible. But Draupadi is always questioned about her polyandrous marital life. During her marriage people's thoughts are, "what would be her sex life with five husbands? How will the brothers share her physically?" (Krishna 46).

“The female phase of feminism is well narrated by Vamshi Krishna with the words of Udalaka, the father of Shwetaketu. That is, “the tradition gave freedom to any women, even a married women was free to have any man they have fancied. He added that women were as free as cows to choose their sexual partners” (Krishna 50). Draupadi’s female phase can be interpreted with her untold love for Krishna and karna. During swayamvara she questions herself why Krishna didn’t take part in swayamwara. Then when Karna told her as a “whore” in the dice hall she asks herself, a person who loves a woman can humiliate her in the public sphere. At the time of Karna’s death she thinks that if Kuntireveales the secret at the early stage she could have married Karna and the war might have not taken place. These are her hidden thoughts which are brought out in her narration that shows female phase.

Elaine Showalter in her work presents “we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but what men have thought women should be” (Showalter 77). During the game of dice Draupadi is on her periods, her thoughts on that are completely in the perspective of feminism. She questions the stereotypical notions of the society in the following lines:

When a man bleeds he is celebrated as a hero by the people around him. But when a woman bleeds it is treated as a shameful event. A man sheds blood on the battlefield to save his people who were born, tearing out the flesh of the same beings whose blood is considered impure. What fewer battles are women fighting when compared to men? It is just the difference in the context (Krishna 98).

The so-called guardians made a stereotypical rule and the religious interpreters banned the entry of women in public space during her menstruation. If she is allowed in the dice hall the war might not have taken place because she would have not allowed Yudhishtira to make her as a stake during the game.

There is an overheard comment on Draupadi that because of her sunparallel beauty the war was taken place. The first reason for the war is she is not allowed in the dice hall due to menstruation stigma and taboo created by the society. It is never the curse of Draupadi as mentioned in patriarchal narrations but because of the problem of choice taken by her father and her brother. If they had their belief in secularism or never considered Draupadi as an object and gave her freedom of choice for selecting her husband the story of *Mahabharata* will lead to a new path of humanity which combines secularism and socialism.

She is deprived from fullness of conjugal life with Arjuna whom she loves with all her heart. In the ancient times Indian women had occupied a very important position; in fact they are considered superior to men. The culture has its own word for power and strength are termed as feminine that is “shakthi” which denotes ‘power’ and ‘strength’. Vamshi Krishna beautifully compares Draupadi with the mother nature and nature itself considers her as its counterpart, that is:

With that lady coming in sight nature witnessed a drastic change but on a pleasant note. Nature that stuffed itself with boundless wisdom and passionately embraces all the creatures but silently witnessed everything happening around it bowed to the lady with admiration as if it had met her counterpart for the first time ever (Krishna 13).

There are various literary evidences which suggest that Kings and kingdom are ruined because of the injustice done to a single woman by the state. The epic *Ramayana* by Valmiki points out that the powerful king Ravana and his entire clan is destroyed because he abducted Seeta without her concern. The epic poem *Mahabharata* by Vedavyasa insists that all the hundred Kauravas were killed in the battlefield because they humiliated Draupadi by disrobing her and called her by names in the public. Injustice to Draupadi is done in public but no one is ready to save her even the respected Gurus in the hall. Krishna is the only one who saves her at last. Most of the men have different thoughts on her, their thoughts are:

To a few men she was the testament of divine purity and devotion while most of the others stared at her with sexual desire. A few were imbued with reverence for her while another few looked at her with disgust. She had experienced all the physical pleasures and agony a living being could have had (Krishna 14).

She is never treated as a human being by her father, husbands, mother in law and by the society. She is considered only as a object. Her father brought up her to avenge his enemy, in swayamwara she is considered as an object that would satisfy their physical needs. When Arjuna won her in swayamwara his brother Yudhisra told mother Kunti that Arjuna had won the priceless 'possession'. Kunti just told them to share it among the brothers though she very well know the fact that her sons came back from swayamwara. So the brothers discussed their marriage, Draupadi's thoughts gives an insight of female phase, "Did they even bother to ask my opinion? Am I a lifeless being for them? Is there no respect for my judgment here? Can I not have any desires? Is a woman's love always taken for granted by the men" (Krishna 26).

Most of the men looked at only on her celestial beauty. To interpret the feminist phase of Elaine Showalter, there are various incidents which can compare with Draupadi's life. They are, Duriyodhana offend her in public because he couldn't win her in swayamwara. But she raises her voice for the injustice done to her in the following lines:

She cursed that she would never forgive the kauravas. She vowed that her would remain loose until Bhima ties it up with the hands of dripping blood of Dushshasana. She reprimanded the Kuru leaders for not standing up for justice despite being aware of dharma (Krishna 108).

Jeyadratha who is the husband of Duryodhana's sister, he was like a brother to Draupadi but he also tried to molest her during her life in forest. So she punishes him by asking her husbands to shave his head on one side. During the period of pandavas disguise in the thirteenth year Keechaka tried to molest her with his lust and power. But he was killed by Bhima on the order of Draupadi, at the moment her heart powerfully thought about her freedom and the women in the society, her inside thoughts were, "She realised the beauty of freedom and she would never have to look back at any kind of slavery for the rest of her life. She wished that every women could be blessed with such freedom forever, in a world utterly dominated by men" (Krishna 150).

Draupadi interrogates the bond of men and women under the relationship of marriage. She asked Yudhisra regarding polyandry as:

Husband Yudhisra you are scholarly enough to extensively understand each mantra chanted by the priests during our wedding and their significance in merging a husband and wife has one entity. If only you could have used that one bit of awareness in reading a woman's heart, I would not have to bear such senseless accusations today (Krishna 14).

She disapproves patriarchy and acknowledgethe forfeit of a woman in a marital life. She interrogates that whether a female is a commodities for auction and does she has her own character. For the sake of life and society every women is sacrificed. It is rather beyond belief that she has gone through intolerable agonies and miseries in life yet she lives with bravery. Being a woman she has desecrated all her limitations like age, race, caste and other boundaries. She is the representation of womanhood. As a woman she had created all the opinion not only for the community of women but also for the entire culture and society with an obligation of reconsidering.

It is worth mentioning that Draupadi does not want to vanish like Seeta even if it is feasible. She decides to battle in opposition to the sinfulness of human king. If she has disappeared like Seeta her diffidence would have been confined but the evil would not have been punished and the society will prevail with injustice. That problem would have continued in the upcoming future of the women. She can wear the ornament of tolerance but she cannot bear the injustice just by bowing her head.

Vamsi Krishna tries to portray the predicament of 'femininities' in relation to conflict, sex, desire and the accountability to guard Draupadi's husbands from wars and make them to prepare properly for the war of Kurushethra. Krishna's version of *Mahabharata* follows the suggestion of Showalter, being a male writer he tried his best to show the feminist phases with the female narration. Elaine Showalter insists that:

Women to invent language that is not oppressive, a language that does not leave speechless but that loosen the tongue. Feminine language must be, by its very nature work on life, passionately, scientifically, poetically in order to make it invulnerable (Showalter 99).

Draupadi's life cycle can be compared to three phases of feminism. That is the feminine phase can be compared with her motherhood and sacrifice for her family. The second phase that is feminist phase can be compared when she fights for her justice during the game of dice. At last the final phase of feminism that is female phase is compared with her desire for Krishna and Karna. Vamsi Krishna portrays an archetypal Indian womanhood in *Draupadi: India's First Daughter* by unfolding the classic heroic woman as every woman.

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