



# “Questioning Patriarchy: The Role Of Women In The Mahabharata Through Draupadi’s Experience” “Questioning Patriarchy: The Role OF Women In The Mahabharata Through Draupadi’s Experience”

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## Abstract:

The *Mahabharata*, which is the greatest epic of Indian shows women’s complex and layered representation. The epic has greatest focus on male heroes and dynastic conflicts, still women’s story events express ethical dilemmas, and played crucial role to philosophical role. The epic encourages readers to think deeply about the roles given to women and men in the society and to reflect on unequal treatment given to women.

The dissertation focuses on at the role of women in the *Mahabharata* by studying the text in a parva- wise.

The idea has not been explored in much details before, and its helps to see women’s role systematically as the story moves forward. It helps to understand the different ways in which women show their presence through decisions, emotions, strength, and even silence. The dissertation also focuses on how their lives are influenced by expectations related to family, duty, and honor and how they deal with this responsibility in their own way- sometimes they remain silent and sometimes raising their voice and questioning what is happening around

them. The dissertation offers a more natural and relatable understanding of women in the *Mahabharata*, highlighting their struggles, strengths, and importance in the epic.

Key Words: *Mahabharata*, Adi Parva, Sabha Parva, Vana Parva, Udyog Parva, Stri Parva ethical dilemmas, Family Duty, Strengths, struggles.

## **Title: - “Questioning Patriarchy: The Role of Women in the Mahabharata through Draupadi’s Experience”**

### **Introduction**

The *Mahabharata*, which is the greatest epic of India, shows women’s complex and layered representation. In this epic, women are not only secondary characters, but authority, political influence, family duty and narrative transformation, which work as important agents in Mahabharata. But the epic has the greatest focus on male heroes and dynastic conflicts, still women’s. story events express ethical dilemmas and play crucial role in guiding philosophical role. Mahabharata, written by Vyasa, and further translated in different versions by various translators, is one of the ancient epic narratives which offers the theme of complicated gender roles, introducing female characters such as Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas; Gandhari, the mother of Kauravas and Draupadi, the wife of the Pandavas. There are other female characters as well that embody the ideals of devotion and its balance with sacrifice within the structure of patriarchy. Although the text emphasizes on the male heroes and their dominance, this epic also portrays the autonomy of the female characters.

Just like how in the epic of Ramayana, Sita, the wife of Rama, was illustrated as the embodiment of purity and loyalty and still after the exile after facing allegations that questioned her purity, she chose to abandon the kingdom choosing to remain in self-exile and assert her autonomy.

Similarly, in Mahabharat as well, Kunti to protect her children from the tricks of the Kauravas choose to remain hidden from the palace just as the instance shows where their palace was set on fire as a scheme to kill the Pandavas. Moreover, the character of Draupadi as well after the humiliation she faced vowed to unbound her hair which symbolises her unresolved injustice and decided not to tie it until it was bathed in Duhsasana’s blood as he was the one who touched and dragged her by her hair when she refused to present herself as slave in the Sabha.

**“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”**

**- Simone de Beauvoir**

The patriarchal institution clearly separates and bifurcates different roles for males and females in the society. The males are given the domain where they are responsible for the decision - making, earning and power exercised activities whereas the females are still considered in a space where they are tied to care, nurture and manage the household or the domestic workload.

Even though traditions and culture are supposedly transformed in the community as the time changes but still women, in the present day and time, women are the ones carrying the honour and reputation of the family. They are symbolised as the dignity of a family and are only considered as important because they somehow preserve their virtue and continuity of the lineage. Just like with the example from the epic *Mahabharata* where the instance of Draupadi disrobing scene where she was humiliated in the Sabha in front of everyone and was giving the tag of a slave just because his husband Yudhishtir who has lost himself in the game of dices also placed his stake on her losing her as well. Through this scene, it was shown how everyone including the elders (Bhishma and Drona) in that Sabha remained silent when

Draupadi was being mistreated. Many men had more than one wife, and this was socially accepted. Men having several wives increased respect and they consider as strong, but for women it meant living with less power and security. Jealousy and competition between co-wives were common. Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandavas was different and challenged social traditions, but also shows how women had little control over marriage decisions. Education was mostly men for men. Most women did not get formal education. Only few women from royal upper-caste families learned subjects like music, reading, or philosophy, but such opportunities were rare. Overall, education remained largely a male privilege.

The concept of “*Stridharma*” (a woman's duty) plays a significant role. Core principles of *Stridharma* are fidelity and devotion to husband, the term *satitva* refers to a women's virtue, chastity, and devotion to her husband (pativrata dharma), this is understood more as purity of mind and spirit, as exemplified by (Kunti, Gandhari) who are considered as *mahasatis* despite the complexities of their lives. Other than the difficulties of their lives, they have to manage household responsibilities, taking care of children, respecting elders, and following societal norms. Moreover, they are also expected to show complete loyalty and selflessness towards their families. Gandhari, the wife of Dhritarashtra, chooses to cover her eyes as an act of immense devotion and solidarity with her blind husband. Kunti faces exile and humiliation along with her sons, always placing their welfare above her own suffering. Madri, wife of Pandu, represents the practice of Sati by choosing to give up her life on her husband's funeral pyre.

In the *Mahabharata*, women are expected to obey and honour the authority of their husband, father and other male members. Draupadi's acceptance of polyandry, marrying all five Pandava brothers on Kunti's command despite her initial hesitation, clearly highlights this expectation and the concept of *Stridharma* (a woman's duty).

The representation of women in *Mahabharata* holds great importance even today also. The epic encourages readers to think deeply about the roles given to women and men in the society and to reflect on the unequal treatment given to women. It helps us understand how social rules and traditions have influenced women's lives for generations. Through its female characters, the text invites us to question patriarchal values and recognize the emotional strength, wisdom, and moral courage of women.

Women, from traditional times suffer from the stigma of male dominance and patriarchal roles in society. Taking in this from the viewpoint of the narrative of *Mahabharat*, an epic from the Indian ancient scripture which provides an insight of our history through 100,000 verses, comprising of 18 Parvas. Even though this epic largely focus itself on the Kurukshetra War, conflict between Kauravas and Pandavas for the establishment of dharma and the decline of Adharma. Yet, the roles of women are still one of the most important themes discussed in the text. This epic not only explores the roles of women as dutiful and loyal wives or figures but also sheds light on the sufferings and the unjust behaviour that they face.

From the character of Kunti, the mother of Pandavas who had to leave the palace first because of the fight of Pandu (her husband) and his elder brother, Dhritarashtra for the crown and then later because of the conflict between Kauravas and Pandavas to the character of Draupadi who had to accept her fate of marrying 5 men and having five husbands just because of a sentence that Kunti uttered. Not only them but additionally other characters such as Gandhari and Satyawati who had to face oppression and that further diminish their intellectual, emotional, and political strength and knowledge.

This dissertation bridges the gap by formulating and examining if the actions of women are still criticized and they have to face unjust behaviour in the contemporary times as well. It assesses the situation and

environment of women in the modern society and compares to the condition of women in the *Mahabharat*.

## **Draupadi**

Adi Parva is first beginning of *Mahabharata*. In this book, there are 19 sections, these are 18 *subparvas* *Anukramanika*, *Sangraha*, *Paushya*, *Paulom*, *Aastika*, *Adivamsavatarana*, *Sambhava*, *Jatugraha*, *Hidimbavata*, *Bakavada*, *Chaitrarodha*, *Swayamvara*, *Baivahika*, *Viduragamana*, *Rajyalabha*, *Arjunavanavasa*, *Subhadraharana*, *Haranaharika*, *Khandavadaha*. This book establishes relationships, moral tension, and socio-political structures that shape the later conflicts of the narrative. In this parva, origin of Kuru dynasty and later birth of Pandavas and Kauravas. The parva also gives us key figures whose decisions and relationships became central to the unfolding drama of the epic. In structural perspective, Adi parva establishes the important role of Dharma(duty), power, legitimacy, and conflict. In this parva establishment of patriarchal rules are also happen. Women were considered as object where women were only allowed to do whatever men say. Their own opinion didn't matter for the society. There were so many restrictions that were on the women and these were lack of autonomy in marriage, women were seen as property not as a human, limited public voice, control over female sexuality, dependence of male member of the family, social judgment and double standards, and expectations of sacrifice.

## **Birth of Draupadi**

Thousands of years back, king Drupada and Acharya Drona were both enemies and they both wanted to defeat each other, but they could not. Then King Drupada decided to do yagna to be blessed with fierce and powerful son who will kill Acharya Drona. When the yagna was completed, sages go to king Draupada's wife to give prasada but she already had something in her mouth so she asked to wait, the sages got angry and throw prasada into the fire. From that fire, a woman came out and the sound came from sky. The sound was, "the woman is born to be the reason for the destruction of evil in this world." This shows that Draupadi is not an ordinary woman. Fire is a symbol of destruction, power, purity. Draupadi life shows all these qualities. Her fire-born nature also shows that how she was fearless and strong.

King Drupada wants son to defeat Acharya Drona, he doesn't want daughter because the thinking of all the important works, decisions, events are taken by the male one. Women are not considered equal to male. In the epic, birth of Draupadi was symbolic and non-biological. The male one has their biological parent but women had celestial parent. In *Mahabharata*, Krishna had biological parents, Draupadi did not. She born from fire. Similarly, in the *Ramayana*, Ram had biological parents, but Sita did not. She was born from the earth. The question is why male heroes have their biological parents and women doesn't? she was deprived from her biological mother love. And her birth was not because their parents want daughter, her birth was for the purpose. At her birth, her father cursed her, she will face immense suffering in her life. The origin of conflict was, this suggests the subsequent pain Draupadi endured, such as being shared by the five Pandavas and her disrobing, was pre-ordained by her father's reluctant acceptance of her. This was Dvapara Yuga, when 'dharma' (righteousness) was considered supreme. Drupad believes that son is superior than daughter, he wants two warrior sons. No one even asked her nor her father that she really want to take this responsibility? Here the representation of women opinion was not really important because the male and the patriarchal society decide what women will do?

## **Name and identity**

Draupadi is known as with several names, first Panchali because she is princess of Panchal, second, she is born of fire so she referred as Yagnyaseni, third Draupadi means daughter of Drupad, she is also said

Krishnaa because she has copper skinned, fiery eyed and had long, black hair. Before her marriage her life was completely dominated by her father. Her identity is linked with her father's political ambitions. Her birth was to take revenge for her father. Important truth: she was a tool in political plans. Her personal life was completely controlled by male decisions. This became a repeated pattern throughout her life.

### **Draupadi's marriage (book 1 section: CLXXXVI to CXCV)**

King Drupada organizes the Swayam Vara for Draupadi to choose her husband where Pandavas was also come for the competition. Many king and prince were also come to win hand of Draupadi. The concept of marriage in patriarchal society was women has accepted the husband that her father will choose for her. Even now, in many villages women are not allowed to choose her husband from another caste, religion. The pressure of family dignity on the head of women. If women marry with someone she really likes, family will be abandoned her. Women choice were very limited. Draupadi was in same condition where, she has to choose in that were present in the Swayam Vara. In the epic the duty of father to get his daughter married, and included with person who did not fulfil this duty in the list of persons incurring the sin of brahmanicide. By marrying women is socio-religious duty of her guardian who was otherwise exposed to disgrace, the social/familiar pressure on women to get married was ensured.

The task was to aim five arrows in the eye of fish by looking at the reflection. Brahmins stood up and go to target the aim. The Brahmin was none other than Arjuna. Arjuna succeeds in aiming the target by showing his skill, patience, and focus. This incident shows that Draupadi's husband was chosen in the base of skill and ability, not birth or wealth. Draupadi was silenced in the court because she knows that her choice was limited and her silence was meaningful also. Draupadi accepts her husband because the rule of society, whoever will win the task, women will marry with him. The acceptance of Arjuna by Draupadi was not her choice or her complete freedom.

### **Draupadi's Marriage to the Five Pandavas**

The most important incident of Adi parva was Draupadi's marriage with five Pandavas. How women were dived into five men? Each day Pandavas begs something and brings home give it to her mother Kunti. After marriage with Draupadi, arjuna decided to do prank with her mother. He said that see mother what we bought today and Kunti replied that anything you bought share it equally with five brothers. After this statement she came out of the house and saw Draupadi and says she cannot take her word back. "All five of my sons are your husband". The acceptance of five husband was not her personal decision. Her consent is not asked at that time. She accepts the decision quietly. The acceptance of decision doesn't show that Draupadi is weak but it shows that how limited choices given to her. Without any participation in this decision, Draupadi life changes completely.

when Draupadi came to place to meet her five husbands to her father. She came to the palace, Drupada see Pandavas and already guessed that who are these. Yudhishtira says to king Drupada that "we will all marry to Draupadi," "impossible" shouted by king. Five husbands of women were not acceptable. Ved Vyasa explains to king Drupad that Draupadi in her past life, she was daughter of rishi's daughter named Nalayani who did serve penance of lord shiva. When shiv asked her what is her desire, she asked she want five specific qualities in her husband and these are righteousness, strength, courage, intelligence, and beauty. She repeated five times "give me a husband". Shiva granted her boon that she would have five husbands in her next birth because these qualities doesn't fit in one single men. Then Drupad give approval. And Draupadi married to Pandavas.

Draupadi decided to live with one year each of the Pandavas in turn. If any brother came between in room if someone is already with Draupadi, the punishment will be, he would go into exile, completing to redeem himself. As the year ended and Draupadi's time with one husband ended and another husband

began, she would walk through fire to regain virginity, becoming a kanya again. Why virginity was considered so important. The *Anusasana-Parva* refers to a virgin woman being desired for marriage.

From this incident, Draupadi was not happy because her life became more tough and adjustable. She has to done more sacrifice. From marrying five men, she doesn't feel very strong or powerful. Instead of that she maintains her relationship very carefully to main harmony in family. In ancient India, polyandry (a women having more than one husband) was very rare in Hindu society. The portrayal of female in epic especially Draupadi where she has five husbands, it was not acceptable by her father, society. Her situation was extraordinary. While in that time, polygyny (a man having multiple wives) was very common and acceptable for the society. Men having more than one wife, the flex it with pride. But women were treated as they were done sin. In patriarchal society, husband married with another women, wife have to accept it because the society was made by men where all the freedom will enjoy men.

Draupadi position in Adi Parva was very problematic and she had to accept the things that were happening around her because she doesn't have any option. In this parva she appears as a woman who has already born with her destiny and cursed by her father, a victim of patriarchal decisions where she cannot raise her voice because the male oriented society has made this, a silent suffer at the beginning of her journey where her born was for political plans of her father and after this her marriage with five Pandavas. Her suffering begins not because of her mistakes but the decisions are taken by the others. And she silently accepted everything and made herself strong to deal with every situation very calmly. In the epic, Draupadi was very strong character where she doesn't complain anything that why these things happening with me? This prepares the ground for injustice.

### **Draupadi in Sabha Parva**

Sabha parva is important part of the Mahabharata where Draupadi disrobing was happen. This parva deals with royal assemblies, power politics, jealousy, moral failure. Kauravas was jealous especially Duryodhana from Pandavas, the jealousy leads to the dice of game. In the jealousy of men, Draupadi became the victim. For Draupadi, Sabha parva was darkest chapter of her life because it turns her life into a respected queen into publicly humiliated women. It also questions how Pandavas fails as husband to save her wife from their cousin. In male society male fails where male was considered as strong and the concept of men save women from any situation that also fails. This parva also seen as crisis of dharma and dharma as patriarchal.

### **The dice game: Beginning of Injustice**

Yudhishtira is invited to the game. Although he knows that gambling is not right, he agrees because of social pressure, pride and manhood. After the game starts one by one, he loses everything- his wealth, kingdom, brothers, himself, and lastly Draupadi. Draupadi has no idea about the game and her husband was playing the game where he loses everything including her. Her husbands didn't inform her about it. In the game of dice, she was considered an object, where her own husband was betting on her. Her identity as a queen and human being was ignored. It represents the extreme objectification of women within the patriarchal system.

### **Draupadi's question and moral courage**

When Draupadi knows about the game, she sends a messenger to the court with a questions question: did Yudhishtira lose first or me?

This question confuses everyone, who were present in the courtroom. If Yudhishtira lost himself first, he has no right to gamble on Draupadi. This moment can be analysed through feminist theory as an act of reclaiming body autonomy. Draupadi asserts that her body is not an object to be owned or exchanged. Everyone was silent and confused there, including the elders. Their silence shows moral weakness and fear. Draupadi's questions expose the failure of justice. Here the lack of dharma was seen because when

Yudhishtira was gambling on Draupadi, elders are responsible of this that if they had raised their voice for Draupadi and tell Pandavas and Kauravas that that is adharna. But everyone was silent because they make dharma as patriarchal. The difference between right and wrong was not considered there. Draupadi question to everyone shows how a woman can question against injustice. She was first women who questions for herself and made everyone confused.

### Humiliation in the Courtroom

Draupadi was dragged into the courtroom without asking her consent. In order of Duryodhana, Dussasana dragged Draupadi by holding her hairs towards assembly. Draupadi says to Dussasana that it doesn't suits on you to take me in the assembly when my season(periods) have come and she was clad in one piece of cloths. But the desire of revenge makes humans turn into devil. Dussasana said to Draupadi that he doesn't care about whether you are in one piece of cloth or naked. As she had been won at the dice and became their slave, she had to listen to them. So Draupadi is standing in the court, bleeding with one cloth on her and Karna says it doesn't matter. Karna says that Draupadi was marrying with five brothers and became "a common wife". Karna blames her for having five husbands, the patriarchy tries to blame everything on women.

O Dussasana, this Vikarna speaking words of wisdom is but a boy. Take off the robes of the Pandavas as also the attire of Draupadi" (Sabha Parva, Section LXVI). Then Dussasana starts pulling Draupadi's attire in front of everyone and none of them stands for her. Everyone was silent. Here Draupadi starts praying to lord Krishna and the miracle happen, the attire was pulled from her body, another attire appeared so on. The divine energy saves Draupadi from the patriarchal society.

### Boons of Draupadi

After the humiliation, Draupadi wants answer from everyone, in the place of giving answer Dhritarashtra offers her three boons to grant her wishes and alleviate her suffering. Draupadi asks for Yudhishtira to be free from slavery, ensuring the dignity of their future generation. Then she requests the freedom of Bhima, Arjuna, and the twins from their bondage. Even after humiliation and her husband was the reason for that but she saves her husband from the slavery. Draupadi save her husbands but they couldn't. Draupadi as a saviour for Pandavas. "Stridharma" was done by Draupadi, where she plays a role of ideal wife. How do men say that women are weak?

After this incident, Draupadi is saved, but is left with wounds on her. It becomes the strongest moral reason for the Kurukshetra war. The court was for justice but it became a place of injustice. The role of Draupadi shows here how she became the symbol of violated dignity, the voice of moral resistance, proof of the failure of patriarchal dharma and her humiliation changes the course of the epic.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, even when the discussion is limited to Draupadi in the *Adi Parva* and *Sabha Parva*, her character powerfully reflects the complex and significant role of women in the *Mahabharata*. Draupadi is not a passive figure; she embodies dignity, intelligence, and moral courage. In the *Adi Parva*, her birth and *SwayamVara* establish her as a woman of agency and destiny, while in the *Sabha Parva*, her humiliation in the dice court exposes the deep injustices faced by women within a patriarchal structure.

Through Draupadi, the epic highlights how women are both respected and wronged, central yet vulnerable. Her questioning in the *सभा* (court) becomes a moment of ethical awakening, challenging notions of dharma and justice. Thus, even within a limited focus, Draupadi emerges as a symbol of resistance and moral strength, showing that women in the *Mahabharata* are not merely secondary characters but crucial voices that shape the narrative and its moral vision.

**Primary text**

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