

Draupadi – The ‘he’ in ‘her’: A blend of the Sinister and the Gentle

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ABSTRACT

Draupadi, the co-wife of the Pandava brothers, is an important character in the epic. She is known to have been the quintessence of beauty and femininity. Her life has largely been a plausible canvass of determination and a majestic display of integrity. She is often regarded as the first feminist voice who had raised concerns about women’s rights, wife’s rights and husband’s authority over the wife. Yet, there has been an enigmatic aspect to her character. The more one delves deeper into her character, the more one is confounded with Draupadi’s heroism. Her strength of character and unyielding will makes her a hero, more heroic and greater than the others. And hence, the paper tries to explore the heroic nature of Draupadi’s character- to unravel the ‘he’ in ‘her’.

Keywords: Heroism, masculinity, womanhood, vengeance, Draupadi.

Introduction

The Mahabharata, the great Indian epic, is usually read as the epitome of all human emotions, a display of machinations of the human mind, a test of human prowess and above all, a grand saga of a fratricidal war. For ages, the epic has been read and re-read as a war of conquest and annihilation between the two branches of the Kuru clan- the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The world of the *Mahabharata* has been considered to be a *Kshatriya*-dominated world where men enjoy status, privilege and honour. Women enjoy status as wives, mothers or daughters of the ruling clan/king. As such, the *Mahabharata* then often becomes a celebration of the men’s valour, especially the one exhibited in the battlegrounds. However, a close reading of the epic renders few women figures much more heroic than the celebrated heroes of the *Mahabharata*. They have played pivotal roles in the epic, but mostly have been relegated under the shadows of their male counterparts.

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Draupadi, the co-wife of the Pandava brothers, is an important character in the epic. She is known to have been the quintessence of beauty and femininity. Her life has largely been a plausible canvass of determination and a majestic display of integrity. She is often regarded as the first feminist voice who had raised concerns about women's rights, wife's rights and the husband's authority over the wife. Yet, there has been an enigmatic aspect to her character. The more one delves deeper into her character, the more one is confounded with Draupadi's heroism. Her strength of character and unyielding will makes her a hero, more heroic and greater than the others. And hence, the paper tries to explore the heroic nature of Draupadi's character- to unravel the 'he' in 'her'.

Exploring heroism in other women characters of the Mahabharata

Draupadi, Yajnaseni, Panchali, Krishnaa, Sairandhri- a blend of the sinister and the gentle, a conglomeration of sensitivity and passionate vengeance. But to merely acknowledge her as the consort of the Pandavas would be to overlook her different dimensions. Her figure is the microcosm of every relative and dynamic emotion that any mortal can experience on earth. No doubt, "the Mahabharata is the nucleus of all religious thoughts of the men and women in India especially who are devoted to Hinduism..." (Bhattacharya 1992, 78), and hence it is essential to unravel the lesser explored characters from the epic to understand their context within a larger human structure. If the above argument is accepted as truth, even if a relative truth, then P. Usha Sundari's question in 'Draupadi in folk imagination' is justified. She examines the reasons "why such a versatile and accomplished woman, displaying a range of passion unrecorded in history or myth, is not accepted by Indian woman as a full expression of femininity." (Sundari 1993, 254). One of the reasons P.Usha Sundari states is that Draupadi in popular feminine imagination is generally held as an emblem of disintegration. "She is like an exotic flower in full cultural bloom, descending to the earth for destruction" (Sundari 1993, 255). In fact, it would not be wrong to conjecture that her whole life is a trail of acrimony. Her husbands- the five Pandavas may be the embodiments of knowledge, power, devotion, beauty and virtue, but it is Draupadi, who lived a life, full of variety. She is the true emblem of the heroic form. Her strength of character and unswerving nature places her among the chief Kshatriya rulers, possessing the quality of 'virya' (Mcgrath 2009, epilogue). She is a woman, with intrinsic feminine qualities, but embedded in her is a heroism, that is unique and persistent. She is not an androgynous figure, but inherent in her is a 'virya' which makes her an accomplished warrior, bringing to the forefront that 'he' in 'her'.

As Kevin McGrath states that “women in the poem, although not agent in the way that male heroes are, participate in heroic culture in a manner that is intrinsic to their affiliation.” The best example to describe the intensity of ‘he’ in ‘her’ in a temporal and morphological sense is Amba, born as Shikhandin in her next birth. The trajectory of Amba’s destiny is a nexus of austerity and an embittered wandering. Having been ruthlessly rejected by King Salva, she lives a life of despair. She laments:

Deprived of the world of a husband, neither
woman nor man!

There remains only one course,

Disgusted with femininity, I am resolved on
masculinity! (Mcgrath 2009, epilogue)

Her life proves a glaring example of the internal portraits of the boundaries and functions of womanhood. The usual feminine tangential terrains are perverted in her life after her abduction by Bhishma goes awry, for he had vowed a lifelong celibacy. Repelled by every kith and kin, she sheds her intrinsic feminine attributes and pursues a life of unrelenting revenge, seeking vengeance from Bhishma and vindication for herself. Again, the rubric of Kunti’s life also dramatizes the paradigmatic relation of femininity and masculinity in the Mahabharata. Both Kunti and Gandhari’s lives override the locus of tremendous emotion and provide the ground for their heroism, being great reservoirs of emotional strength and verbal ability. As McGrath elaborates, “Kunti is profoundly different from other women in the poem, set apart by her powers, and her femininity overarches all the other women in the narrative.” Iravati Karve seems to validate Kunti’s heroism when she says- “A dozen years of happiness were too few to compensate her for her long life of sorrow and humiliation” (Karve 1969, 68). “Making her own way in a hostile world, she establishes her sons and ultimately sublimates the ego, transcending the self to give up her life reconciled, made whole, calm of mind, all passion spent” (Bhattacharya 2005, 63-4). She perplexes the readers by her extraordinary zealotry. Debunking and deconstructing the Kshatriya mould, which specifies a woman and man’s domain, she takes the upper hand over Pandu, while begetting sons for him with the help of divine interventions. When Pandu urges Kunti to beget him more sons, Kunti blatantly refutes his request, quoting the scriptures to him, just as he had quoted Shvetaketu to her:

The wise do not sanction
a fourth conception, even in crisis.

The woman who has intercourse
with four men has loose morals;
the woman who has intercourse
with five is a prostitute. (Bhattacharya 2005, 51)

She is firm in her resolve that she will not satisfy her husband's indiscriminate cravings for a successor. It is a well-known fact that the first and foremost duty of a Kshatriya hero is the protection of humanity, and in Pandu-Kunti's case, it is the woman who performs the function of being the living repository of the Kshatriya prescription. She screams- "I protected him all these days. How could you tempt him?" (Karve 1969, 73) when she discovers Pandu dead as he could not resist the temptation of cohabiting with Madri. No doubt, Kunti was not devoid of those petty feminine jealousies and bitterness, but more than that she was the sole protector of all the five Pandavas- administering their lives and giving them a direction like a sole mast. Her heroism is also executed when she gets the Nishada woman and her five sons drunk in the House of Lac so that there is no evidence of the Pandavas' escape from the gutted dwelling. Professor P. Lal says that it was Kunti who fed the Nishada lady and her five sons and got them intoxicated and so this act parallels the "gory murder of Duncan, with Kunti playing the role of an eager yet hesitant Lady Macbeth. Vyasa does not say who actually set fire to the palace. Bhima? If so, instigating Macbeth- Bhīma was Kunti, bringer-forth of men children only" (Lal). She is arguably the most potent and generative heroic figure in the whole epic- vigorous and authoritative, often articulating of what constitutes the Dharma. Yudhisthira may curse all women on earth owing to Kunti's silence regarding Karna, but then it is her silent sufferings and lamentations that bring forth the quality of heroism. She may not emulate Satyavati and disregard the social opprobrium by acknowledging Karna as her first born, born in union with the Sun God. Her heroic dimensions are all the more enhanced when one considers how as a widow, without any immediate male kin, she has to constantly influence Yudhisthira in the name of Kshatriya honour never to forget the insults heaped upon them. She, a woman, is the controlling and guiding force of their lives and it is not ironical then, that it is not five women, but one single consort, Draupadi, who later becomes the determining figure in their lives.

Even Gandhari dwells on the threshold of the masculine-feminine duality. Mother of hundred sons, but no one remained alive to perform her funeral rites. Deprived of even the satisfaction of glancing at her sons, her tragic life poignantly converges aspects of heroism and sacrifice. "She, more than any other person in the epic kept her faith in the moral order undimmed, and

in the hours of supreme crisis in her life, she always unhesitatingly sacrifices narrow, personal, selfish interest and embraced the cause of virtue and righteousness” (Madhavananda 1953, 170). When she learnt of Dhritarashtra’s blindness, she too blindfolded herself, as she did not want to have any undue advantage over her husband.

However, the poet gradually reveals that even in her self-enforced parity in blindness, she possessed a great advantage over her husband. With Dhritarashtra, physical blindness becomes a symbol of moral blindness. But with the world around her darkened, Gandhari’s inward vision develops the capacity to see afar; she sees the need for integrity and the disastrous consequences its betrayal will generate, surely even if slowly and after the gestation of decades. And when these consequences surface explosively, shattering the lives of multitudes, her self-enforced blindness ceases to be mere epic hyperbole and acquires tragic meaningfulness. (Chaitanya 1985, 159)

In spite of the invincible hatred that the Kauravas experience for the Pandavas, Gandhari has always tried to dissuade them and often chastised them for she wanted to prevent the fratricide. In her admonitions of her son, she was deeply critical of his treacherous means. She is more heroic than Dhritarashtra and the Kaurava clan, and so Krishna has given her the power to curse the whole Yadava clan. She never actively participated in the Kshatriya action, but her pent-up Kshatriya power and anger is too much for Yudhishthira to bear. She, too, like Kunti always lives on the periphery of action, never actively participating, but it is through their innate and enormous mental energy that they become heroic. The world of Kshatriya kinship is one arena where women figures live out their time according to the Kshatriya Dharma prescribed to them. It is only men who venture outside that arena in order to act violently. Women in heroic culture are outside the action of physical vehemence. Yet, in spite of this restriction, women behave as individuals of strong and active volition. For Amba, Gandhari and Kunti, the transition from the female sphere to the male arena occurs not in an actual battlefield but in their psychological sphere. Amba’s aimless wanderings and endless sufferings are more torturous than any physical pain that a Kshatriya may experience. Similarly, Gandhari and Kunti’s mental abilities are more heroic than any other male, so this trio intricates the aspect of ‘he’ in their characters.

Exploring Draupadi and Her Heroism

But it is Draupadi, who epitomizes the concept of ‘he’ in ‘her’. “The spectrum of her emotions ranges from scenes of intimate frivolity and moments of coy and seductive modesty to speeches

that advocate extraordinary and unmitigated bloodshed” (Mcgrath 2009, epilogue). In fact, her name is a patronym. She is an amazing combination of beauty and imperious pride. In fact, her birth itself from the sacrificial altar is heroic. Dark smouldering beauty, fatal and ominous, characterized her birth when “an unseen, oracular voice had announced that she would fulfil the purpose of the Gods and conserve the world by bringing about the destruction of unrighteous rulers” (Chaitanya 1985, 151). She exhibits such aggression and anger, unparalleled in the history of Kshatriya womanhood. Draupadi has frequently been recuperated as a feminist by many scholars, but the crux of interpreting the heroism in her character can be attributed to various episodes in the Mahabharata. It is noteworthy that Draupadi is the only woman whose appearance is described in detail:

eye-ravishing Panchali,
black-and-smiling-eyed...
Dark-skinned Panchali,
Lotus-eyed lady,
Wavy-haired Panchali
Hair like dark blue clouds,
Shining coppery carved nails,
Soft eye-lashes,
Swelling breasts and
Shapely thigh. (Bhattacharya 2005, 67)

Kevin McGrath comments that “Draupadi is, in fact that arch-kshatriya, one who is so fierce that her energy cannot remain finite and she engenders their own self-destruction.” She combines in her persona an unearthly beauty as well as a devastatingly and overwhelming capacity for vengeance and devastation. She is also an epitome of inordinate suffering. To spend her life as a joint possession of the five brothers, to suffer utter humiliation at the hands of Jarasandha, Keechaka and the Kauravas, to see her sons brutally murdered, to spend her years in exile and incognito and that too despite being Drupada’s daughter is indeed worth praising. But the heroic potential of her character is explored in the scenes after the dicing game, when Yudhisthira staked her and lost her to Sakuni and the Kauravas. Being dragged by her hair, clad in a single garment and in her menstrual period, it is one of the most horrifying and disgusting episodes of the Mahabharata, when the modesty of a daughter-in-law was being outraged in front of the elders of the clan. In fact, an analogy can be drawn between the

disrobing of Draupadi by Duhsasana and the gang-rape of Dopdi Mejhen in Mahasweta Devi's short story Draupadi. Draupadi or Dopdi as her name appears in dialect, is a rebel and appears on the list of wanted people. After continuous rape and abuses, the story concludes with a magnificent final climax in which she overarches the authority and hierarchy of the Senanayak. In fact, in Draupadi, "what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero) sexuality and gender violence begins to blur" (Singh Rai, 101). There is no sentimentalism or romanticism in portraying Dopdi's character. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak says that the gang rape of Draupadi "is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law" (Spivak 1987, 183-4). She is being retributed for her 'crime' according to the Government. A similar theory may be put forward regarding the disrobing of Draupadi in the Mahabharata. According to Iravati Karve, Draupadi's 'biggest mistake' was her question to the usher- "Go into the assembly and ask if Dharmaraja had become a slave before he staked me," (Karve 1969, 125) as it involves digressive and contradicting legal issues and complications regarding her position as the "nathavati anathavat" (Ibid, 126). But, both the theories do not justify the physical horror and anguish these women had to undergo to satisfy the abuser's perverted sense.

The disrobing of Draupadi in the assembly hall may not configure as an actual rape, but nonetheless can be interpreted as an attempted "sexual violation of a woman in a public space. Woman, as the sole and singular object of the public gaze in such scenes, may ambivalently be the recipient of both admiration and scorn: neither response is free of the overtones of the other or of sexual significance. The woman's response to the gaze is also ambivalently divided between pride and shame..." (Rajan 1999, 334). And, herein lies the heroic antics of Draupadi and Dopdi. Their actions and anger are redolent of the fact that the episode of the violation of their modesty has strengthened their character. In fact, the 'disrobing of garments' creates a dramatic climax. For one it amounts to a virtual rape and insult when called a harlot by Karna, owing to her polyandrous marriage, and for the other corresponding to a similar pattern of polyandry, though not legitimized in a situation of multiple rapes. After that Dopdi "remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops" (Spivak 1987, 184).

Both Draupadi and Dopdi are heroic in their own response then. For Dopdi, the disrobing of her garments becomes a symbol of her remarkable survival, a metaphor of her empowerment through her feminine nakedness.

Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth ... Draupadi stands before him, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds...her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is terrifying, sky-splitting, and sharp as her ululation, “what’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?... There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me”...Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Spivak 1987, 196)

Draupadi’s reaction in the Mahabharata was more emotional and psychological. Like Dopdi, she succinctly expressed her anger and aggression towards the Kaurava clan.

It is then that, all of a sudden, we find a complete reversal from meek passivity to an extraordinarily articulate and forceful expression of a personality that towers above all the men in the royal court. Fire-alter-born Yajnaseni shocks everyone by challenging the Kuru elders’ very concept of Dharma in a crisis where the modern woman would collapse in hysterics. (Bhattacharya 2005, 83)

Her gesture of greeting the elders is a metaphor of sarcasm of the terrible passion for revenge that was tormenting her heart. Her vow of not tying up her long, black tresses until and unless she washes it with Duhsasana’s blood remains one of the most startling gesture of avenge, for Draupadi’s nature was inept of mercy. “She affirms that retributive punishment is the duty of the Kshatriya and sparing the guilty is a crime” (Chaitanya 1985, 151). Wronged by Duhsasana’s perfidy at the assembly, humiliated by Keechaka in King Virata’s court and outraged by Jayadratha’s perverted lust, she never really allows the Pandavas to forget and forgive. Her revenge will only be satisfied by the death of Keechaka, Jayadratha and Duhsasana. Her act of washing her glossy untied hair with the blood of Duhsasana may be gory and barbaric; it is clearly a manifestation of the terrible anguish she felt at her heart which had transformed all affections into a sublime form of hatred. And so, Draupadi is more heroic than the Pandavas, for it is she who has to wait for thirteen years to seek revenge, it is she who has

suffered humiliation and torment at each and every step and had to bear with the insults nonchalantly. “She has a non-compromising spirit; no passive acceptance, no psychic withdrawal, no tame surrender at the fact of defeat. A heroic temper that refuses to sacrifice determination...” (Sundari 1993, 257-8)

Her heroism is also evident in her silent bearing even after the treacherous death of Abhimanyu and her five sons- Prativindhya, Shrutasom, Shrutakirti, Shatanik and Shrutakarma. Bereft of all her progeny and totally desolate, she has nothing left in her life for containment. Yet she never gives up. Also, to brush her aside as a polyandrous woman would be taking a prejudiced stance. Even though polygamy was practised, polyandry was not common. To be the consort of five brothers at the same time is not just about dividing herself into five different moulds, but to be able to develop multifaceted qualities which will enable her to keep all her husbands interested.

She could converse and debate the intricacies of the Dharma Sashtra with Yudhisthira. She could coquette Bhima, who is easily irritable and temperamental. She is aesthetically subtle enough to sustain the attention of an artist, scholar and archer like Arjuna, superior to everyone in Aryavarta except Krishna and who is desired even by divine fairies like Urvashi. She is charming and tender enough to match the handsomest Nakula. She could be solemn and gentle to suit Sahadeva, the silent seer of things.” (Ibid, 255-6)

It was not easy for her to cohabit with any one brother for a year and then in subsequent years, suppress all her emotions and feelings and be the wife of the next brother, both physically and mentally. And Draupadi has managed this feat superbly. She has a concentration of senses and versatility, which makes her heroic. She is not only heroic in her vengeance, determination and aesthetic temper but heroic in her deeds also. Like a true Kshatriya hero, she had rescued her husband from utter ruin, so much so that even Karna was bound to eulogize her. With Dhritarastra’s boon, she wins back the honor of her ‘enslaved’ husbands. This is a typical episode of a reversal of the Kshatriya heroic attribute, for according to the scriptures, it is the men who are supposed to play the protector’s role. Also, during their exile, it is Draupadi who plays the role of bread giver, feeding the whole universe before she feeds herself. Thus, her heroism is not only showcased in her belligerent attitude but also in her mental strength. A total assessment of her life would definitely suffice the fact that in spite of all those innate feminine aesthetic qualities, it is her heroism which makes her such a challenging character. Her heroism is not over the top but definitely the reflection of the masculinity in her traits.

Conclusion

To reckon with, then, the name Yajnaseni justifies Draupadi's life. Born from the sacrificial altar, her whole life has been a sacrifice for the establishment of Dharma. She has burnt in the hellish fire of revenge throughout her life, never really gaining peace in exchange. When she finally achieved what she desired, there were not many left to share her emotions. She is thus, a true hero in the true sense, with firm resolve and passion. Scholars have mostly distinguished females and males on the basis of the 'purusa' and 'prkriti' qualities, with the females leaning heavily towards a sensitive side. But Draupadi's character seems to comprise the nucleus of both 'purusa' and 'prkriti', perhaps with a higher ratio of the 'purusa'. She is a true emblem of the alienation of individuals-heroic, yet desolate and bereft. Each and every moment of her life has been an injudicious and punitive action, yet she had borne it heroically. So, it is misogynistic to address Draupadi as a 'kritya.' "Each agony of that dying yuga Draupadi suffered in her own person" (Karve 1969, 119) like a Kshatriya. She has been a woman who wasn't anxious of the unrelenting forces as she "who was born of fire (can never) be afraid of flames?" (Ray 2007, 112). Thus, her heroism is not ephemeral but an enunciation of long-lasting greatness, and it is a diligent task to acknowledge the masculine traits in her feminism-the 'he' in 'her'.

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