



Draupadi: The Early Feminist

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Abstract

The Mahabharata is the longest epic in Indian literature as well as world literature. Draupadi is the heroine of this epic. Many see Draupadi as an early feminist because of her fearlessness. She speaks for herself when Yudhistira staked her and lost in the game of dice, while being disrobed by Duhsasana and all the elders of Hastinapur remained silent. She was far ahead of her time. It was her ability to use her position with responsibility and insight that show her true power as a woman. Draupadi's fearlessness and uncompromising nature make her of great importance in the history of world literature.

Keywords: Draupadi; *Dasi*; Stake; Assembly

Opinion Article

From the ancient time, literature always has its lion's share in not only bringing about social changes, but also projecting them. Ancient Indian scriptures are truly esoteric. According to feminist critic Rajeshwari Rajan women in Indian fiction through ages have been represented as embodiment of purity and spiritual power and respected as godly beings on one hand and on the other, viewed as essentially weak creatures constantly requiring the protection of man as their love and master. The great Indian epic Mahabharata delves deeper into this ambiguity in the position of women. It represents and relates power of women to their sexuality. Among all the women Draupadi stands out by her own worth. She is the queen of Hastinapur, wife of Pandavas and also an early feminist. It is the fire and energy in Draupadi, the spirit to fight injustice and her multifacetedness that makes her the most mysterious and majestic woman for all ages.

Draupadi is always been considered as the impetus and the reason for the holocaust in the Mahabharata; a great war which proved to be yuganta, and hence she is termed as *Kritya* (the reason). Unlike many women in her era, Draupadi's father, Draupad allowed her to be educated. Draupadi's strength and courage were the result of her education, which also lent her a sense of confidence unfamiliar to most women of her time. She is the only

known woman to have, shockingly for her time, openly insulted the Kuru elders and her husbands in Sabha parva.

Born from the sacred sacrificial fire of yagya, Yagyaseni; better known as Draupadi, seems to be walking through fire throughout her life. During Sabha Parva, Yudhishtira was enticed to play a game of dice, one by one he lost all his possessions but like an intoxicated gambler he went on playing. He lost his brothers and then himself. When he stated that he has nothing to stake, Shakuni suggested that he still has Draupadi and by staking her, he could win his freedom back [1-6].

Here is a dramatic change of fortune for the Pandavas and Draupadi. She who had been empress, is now suddenly reduced to the status of a *Dasi*, a slave woman. But she is unaware of it. At the command of Duryadhana, Draupadi was dragged to the court by Duhsashana. She was insulted verbally and physically abused in-front-of an open court by her own family members, her brother-in-laws to be precise. It is strange that this was a violent act carried out by her own in-laws, and all the elders of her family like Bhishma, Dhritarastra, Dronacharya were present in the court, and kept silent.

This silence might have planted the seed of the destruction which was about to come, not only of the family but of an entire clan.

The level of humiliation and deprivation Draupadi faced despite being a princess, a Queen was immense. Draupadi is popularly known as *Nathvati* *Anathvat* in many analysis of her character.

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She was the Pandava Queen, daughter of the rich Panchal Kingdom, sister of the great warrior Drishtadyumna, friend of Krishna still the way she was humiliated and her dignity was put at stake deserves special mention.

The scene in the court where Draupadi is shamed presents a clear assertion of female strength and agency. We are made aware of her as an individual. Draupadi was dressed in only one garment and menstruating, she was dragged into the assembly. Infuriated, she sweeps her glance across her five husbands, who sit in front of the gathered nobles and watch her humiliation. For, Yudhistira, in his last desperate bid to win back the kingdom, has staked her as his last possession. The question whether Draupadi has been legitimately won is debated by the kings. But Karna, strongly insistent that she has been, orders Duhsasana to strip her garment from her body. Her outraged modesty finds an outlet in her angry words addressed to the kings, demanding to know how they, who are supposedly learned in the proper ways of conduct, could silently look on while she was being humiliated.

The episode also highlights that the beautiful Draupadi is also quick-witted with a gift of the gab. Her debating skills are exemplary and at the conclusion of the episode we realise that her wit has saved her husbands from impending slavery. Our sympathy reaches out to this wronged woman, a princess, a queen, yet helpless, who has to look to her own resources to save not only herself, but also her husbands, and finally her sons.

What is left of the Dharma of the king? Draupadi's question echoes in the eras of the nobility in the assembly. Her words are not just a plea of a humiliated and helpless woman, but also a challenge to the knowledge of right and wrong of the kings. It was a step unimaginable for a woman of her time and setting. Draupadi's question is not an antiquated question of a wronged virtuous woman whose integrity has been put on stake.

A pioneer of feminism, she fought for her rights when her enslaved husbands lost her in a game of dice. In a court full of the most powerful kings of the time, here was a woman who dared to stand for herself and speak up, aloud against male perpetrated injustices.

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