

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *'Krishnaa' Draupadi: 'In Her Will Rise Many Fears!'*

The character of Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* is an enigmatic portrayal of contradictions. Her body is the site on which the entire saga of power and control unfolds. Objectified and allocated like a commodity, caught in a web of the hyper-phallic enterprise of war and aggrandisement, silenced or made a spokesperson of the establishment, Draupadi loses her all – her father, her brother, her sons, and then her sense of self when she is blamed by Yudhisthira of partisanship and is left behind to die on their last journey up the Himalayas. Censured as a nymphomaniac and condemned as a warmonger, a queen who lived in the 'Palace of Illusions', Draupadi is trapped in a schizophrenic existence in Vyasa's textual universe. Also called Krishnaa, she is one of the three dark ones who decide the fate of the narrative, the other two being Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, the creator of the great epic and Bhagavan Shri Krishna, the restorer of Dharma, the transcendental signified. This chapter seeks to comprehend how Draupadi scaled the distance from being a victim of patriarchy - a daughter born and raised for revenge, a bride condemned by contemporaries for practicing polyandry, a wife staked at will and a daughter-in-law discredited by the royal court - to a woman who changed the course of events in the narrative.

*The Mahabharata* does not claim to reveal the ideal way of life for all. Rather, the aim

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was to create a smorgasbord of all that was good, bad and ugly, gently nudging the reader to relate to what is relevant. The debate goes on, leaving the reader with the eternal question - What is Dharma? If Dharma is subtle as the epic reminds us frequently, is constancy possible in deciphering the meaning of Dharma? Few characters have attempted to answer this question as well as Draupadi, the common Queen of the Pandavas. Powerful, strong, assertive, much-maligned, Draupadi is the pivot on which the saga of the internecine war rotates. Yet her character is problematized in *The Mahabharata* for several reasons.

We are troubled by Draupadi's silence at some very strategic junctures. Where was the strong and articulate Draupadi when the biggest decision of her life was being taken? It is difficult to believe that a woman who could so powerfully shame the elders in the royal court for their role in the attempted 'Chira Harana'(disrobing), would maintain a deathly silence when she was being portioned out like a product amongst five contenders and pushed into a polyandrous marriage that earned her the life-long stigma of being a nymphomaniac and a woman of questionable morals. The Draupadi who so strongly questioned Yudhishtira's right to stake her in the game of dice was very different from the one who mouthed patriarchal jargon, claiming that she did not "laugh loudly or indulge in any kind of high passion or anything else that may cause offence" (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 3: Vana Parva: Draupadi -Satyabhama Samvad, Section CCXXXI)). The epic reports:

अतिहासातिरोषौ च क्रोधस्थानं च वर्जये ।

निरताहं सदा सत्ये भर्तृणामुपसेवने ॥२८॥ *The Mahabharata BORI* 3:222: 28

The 'Pandita' Draupadi who engaged Dharma Raja Yudhishtira in a scholarly discourse in the Vana Parva and made him acknowledge the validity of her arguments, did not have a word to say when she was informed that the reason of her fall on the Himalayas was that she loved Arjuna more than her other husbands. The Draupadi whose assertive conversations in *sakhi-bhava* (like a friend) with Krishna established her as an strong and

eloquent woman was hushed in the epic when she was cheated in the relationship and promised as a pawn to Karna, in a desperate attempt to stall the great internecine war.

Did Draupadi have a choice? Did she get to protest? Or has she been silenced? Being burdened with a historical misdemeanour, stigmatized for life, she clearly did not get to voice herself in the meta-narrative. This silence is broken in the re-reading of the epic which has led to the release of Draupadi, the woman. *The Mahabharata* has inspired a host of re-tellings and hybrid narratives, giving rise to the suspicion that the dominant discourse in the meta-narrative is ideologically flawed and essentially one-sided, which the hybrids seek to correct. While revising and re-interpreting the story of Draupadi, the hybrid narratives critically analyse the ideological underpinnings and investments, reshaping the discourse and restoring the balance. The character of Draupadi in *The Mahabharata*, though a strong portrayal of female agency and initiative, has not come out of the marginalized status right till the end of her tragic life. She may have been the queen, but certainly without a choice. The options that were made available to her were essentially created by a patriarchal set-up where women served the agenda of men.

Dilemmas created by a phallogocentric discourse ruled Draupadi's life - whether to go for the sham of 'self-choice' in her marriage, whether to say no to the decision of Kunti to co-habit with all five of the Pandavas at once, or whether to honour the decision of Yudhisthira to stake her at will - she did not really have an option. Draupadi's body was a text inscribed by the rules of patriarchy. This chapter focuses on the revisionist re-tellings by female authors like Pratibha Ray, Chitra Banerjee-Divakaruni, Mahashweta Devi, Saoli Mitra, Sashi Deshpande and others who have attempted a deconstruction of the Indic myths, questioning the gender binary and the privileging of androcentricity at the cost of the 'other'. The re-tellings rescue Draupadi from such a Patrifocal worldview and give her a voice. "If history is written by the winners, so are the epics. It is possible that during its long narrative history, much of

what showed Patriarchy in a bad light has been erased off *The Mahabharata*. It is also possible that *The Mahabharata* told to Janamejaya itself was an acceptable form of the story”, says Chaitanya (*The Silencing of Draupadi* 10). This makes the task of revisionist writers extremely important, as they must read between the lines, sense patriarchal bias and hear the muffled voices which have been purged. The Draupadi that steps out of the pages of the re-writings refuses to be cowed down by the androcentric worldview that had hushed her epic counterpart. My attempt here is to give this Draupadi a voice.

### *Draupadi Revisited: Subversion through Recontextualization*

The new Draupadi is informed by the sensitivities of the woman who refuses to remain silent and asserts her choice of representation. Thus, in the re-tellings paternal myths are revised to situate them in a feminist discourse, as Alicia Ostriker analyses in her “*The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking*”:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible. (72)

While discussing the questions of language and narration in patriarchal textual traditions and feminist discourse, Aparna Mandal (2015) scrutinizes the twin issues of gender and power that are extremely relevant to the consideration of Draupadi’s role as narrator in the texts which challenge the narratorial authority of *The Mahabharata*. Mandal refers to the Indian cultural and scriptural tradition which posits a purity/non-purity divide around the discourse of language, whereby the possessors and the correct users of language i.e. vac in Sanskrit, are considered to be morally, culturally and socially superior to those who do not possess it. Mandal quotes a mythic story from the *Shatapatha Brahmana* wherein since the asuras, i.e. the

demons, were shown as having possession of vac ( speech), identified as a woman, the gods embark upon a plan to deprive them of its possession by asking yagna (identified as male) to seduce vac. As vac yields to him, the gods take possession of her : “The gods then cut her off from the Asuras; and having gained possession of her and enveloped her completely in fire, they offered her up as an offering of the gods” (*Shatapatha Brahmana*, 3.2.1: 23, 31). The initial possession of vac by the demons makes such a postulation even more problematic and throws open the possibility of the demons having enjoyed a Godlike status prior to their deprivation of vac.

˘ The problematic construction of vac as simultaneously positive and negative - positive in its association with masculinity, power and prestige and negative in its alliance with femininity, powerlessness and passivity encapsulates a contradiction at the heart of the Indian patriarchy’s attitude towards women, says Mandal, quoting Sally Goldman:

The semantic gendering of vac, and the inscribing on to the concept of vac the feminine roles of wife and mother, addresses the masculine fears or concerns about female sexuality. As vac is inscribed as feminine, on to her are projected anxieties that underlie issues of sexual power and possession. Moreover, the feminine world as constructed by the male world of Brahmanical society is one wherein levels of sexual control and purity are measured. The result becomes a metaphor for Woman in traditional Brahmanical society. She does not belong within the group, and like the asuras is relegated to the world of the Other. (*Speaking Gender* 76)

Mandal conjectures that the fear of the sexualized woman manifest in all patriarchal societies can be further extended to the fear of the feminine appropriation of language, and the need to control language arises from an anxiety to preserve the male bastions of power. One is forced to think of Draupadi who was gifted with the felicity in words, was exceedingly glib and articulate, but instead of being felicitated for the same, was silenced time and again. The

establishment was scared of her incisive wit and interpretations. Draupadi was in a way vac or Vagdevi (The goddess of speech), whose presence was sought by both Pandavas and Kauravas, pitched in a binary struggle like the Devas and the Danavas.

As against the masculine world of the grand epic, we have the retellings which detour from the meta-narrative. The Draupadi who speaks from the feminine writings - *écriture féminine* – inscribes the female body with a language that rejects the masculine parameters. Dani Cavallaro (2003) defines the concept as one which inscribes the female body and female sexuality in textuality and discourse:

A concurrently utopian and experimental practice, *écriture féminine* seeks to write that for which no language yet exists – namely, the silenced, the marginalized and the repressed – while rejecting the principles of rationality and logic fostered by the masculine Symbolic order, traditional concepts of progression and linearity and the conventional subordination of the body to the mind. (*French Feminist Theory* 119)

The hybrid narratives that move away from the meta-narrative read the silence and omissions in the story, listening to the voice of a woman trapped between the lines. This Draupadi was not mute when she was introduced by her brother in the self-choice ceremony. She questioned her father's agenda in using her as a bait for Arjuna and asked why this should be called 'swayamvara' at all. She challenged the lecherous looks of old patriarchs, some of them old enough to be her sire. The subversive femininity evident in Draupadi in the re-tellings undermines the power and authority of the established system which upholds the monolith of patriarchy. She engages in subversion to use the patriarch's "rules" against him, as happened in the case of Mahashweta's Dopdi in *After Kurukshetra* (397).

Subversion takes place through the act of recontextualization. Draupadi who is silent about Karna in the meta-narrative is seen holding hands with him after death, at a place where she does not need her palace of illusions. Instead of blindly following the establishment she

exercises her choice, disillusioned by the fact that the hyper-phallic forces of patriarchy had used her in their agenda of aggrandizement. She finds herself sympathizing with Karna for whom she had held a life-long love-hate relationship as he was as much a marginal as she herself was. He was deprived of his patrimony, she, her agency, both fighting a pointless war.

Misunderstood, marginalized and subversive, Draupadi was not just the royal daughter-in-law living in privilege, but a woman lost, who found herself through the re-tellings. Tricked into marrying five without having been given any choice in the matter, her entire life was spent balancing the egos of her multiple partners. She had mentally chosen and garlanded Arjuna, the ace archer, the one who had ‘won’ her in front of the entire assembly, but in her deeds and actions she never let anyone know of the special place she had for this temperamental hero.

Yet even in her heart if she was ‘unfaithful’ to the others by being ‘more’ faithful to Arjuna, she had to pay dearly for that, being the first one to fall as they ensued on their last journey:

Those princes of restrained souls and devoted to Yoga, proceeding to the north, beheld Himavat, that very large mountain. As those mighty ones were proceeding quickly, all rapt in Yoga, Yajnaseni, falling off from Yoga, dropped down on the Earth. Beholding her fallen down, Bhimasena of great strength addressed king Yudhishtira the just, saying, ‘O scorcher of foes, this princess never did any sinful act. Tell us what the cause is for which Krishna has fallen down on the Earth!’ "Yudhishtira said: ‘O best of men, though we were all equal unto her she had great partiality for Dhananjaya. She obtains the fruit of that conduct today, O best of men. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 17: Mahaprasthanika Parva: Section 2)

The laws made by the hyper-phallic society, the ‘male gaze’, the circum-ambulatory forces of the androcentric establishment ensured that not one of her husbands - not even Arjuna – turned back to help her on her feet. Their need for her was done. And to think that this

treatment was reserved for Draupadi who sounds like a poster-girl for patriarchy, mouthing what it wants to hear:

नाभुक्तवति नास्नाते नासंविष्टे च भर्तारि | न संविशामि नाश्रामि सदा कर्मकरेष्वपि ||२३||  
क्षेत्राद्बनाद्वा ग्रामाद्वा भर्तारिं गृहमागतम् | प्रत्युत्थायाभिनन्दामि आसनेनोदकेन च ||२४||  
श्रुत्वा स्वरं द्वारगतस्य भर्तुः; प्रत्युत्थिता तिष्ठ गृहस्य मध्ये |  
दृष्ट्वा प्रविष्टं त्वरितासनेन; पाद्येन चैव प्रतिपूजय त्वम् ||६||  
अनर्मे चापि हसनं द्वारि स्थानमभीक्ष्णशः | अवस्करे चिरस्थानं निष्कुटेषु च वर्जये ||२७||  
प्रमृष्टभाण्डा मृष्टान्ना काले भोजनदायिनी | संयता गुप्तधान्या च सुसंमृष्टनिवेशना ||२५||

द्रौपदिसत्यभामासंवादपर्व ( *The Mahabharata BORI*3:222:23-27)

[I neither bathe nor eat nor sleep till my husband has; till, in fact, our servants have. When he returns from the town or the forest, I have water and a seat ready for him. I do the household chores, cook and clean at the right time. I don't dawdle at the gate, and I don't laugh unless the joke is really good. I am never long in the bathroom or in pleasure gardens. Giggling is out of the question. I fret when he's gone and give up sandal- paste and flowers. I see that things which don't appeal to him don't appeal to me either. A husband is a god to his wife, isn't he? One thing more—I never speak ill of my mother-in-law. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 3: Vana Parva: Draupadi -Satyabhama Samvad, Section CCXXXI)]

When asked by Satyabhama as to how she keeps her husbands in control, Draupadi presses on:

एवमुक्त्वा सत्यभामा विरराम यशस्विनी | पतिव्रता महाभागा द्रौपदी प्रत्युवाच ताम् ||८||  
असत्स्त्रीणां समाचारं सत्ये मामनुपृच्छसि | असदाचरिते मार्गे कथं स्यादनुकीर्तनम् ||९|| 3:222:8-9  
नैतादृशं दैवतमस्ति सत्ये; सर्वेषु लोकेषु सदैवतेषु | यथा पतिस्तस्य हि सर्वकामा |



यथा पतिस्तस्य हि सर्वकामा; लभ्याः प्रसादे कुपितश्च हन्यात् ॥२॥ 3:223: 2

तस्मादपत्यं विविधाश्च भोगाः; शय्यासनान्यद्भुतदर्शनानि |

वस्त्राणि माल्यानि तथैव गन्धाः; स्वर्गश्च लोको विषमा च कीर्तिः ॥३॥ 3:223:3

अतिरस्कृतसम्भाषा दुःस्त्रियो नानुसेवती |अनुकूलवती नित्यं भवाम्यनलसा सदा ॥२६॥

सम्प्रेषितायामथ चैव दास्या; मुत्थाय सर्वं स्वयमेव कुर्याः | 3: 222:26

जानातु कृष्णस्तव भावमेतं; सर्वात्मना मां भजतीति सत्ये ॥७॥ 3:222: 7

*The Mahabharata BORI 3: 223 (द्रौपदिसत्यभामासंवादपर्व)*

[Don't ask me what painted women do to hold their husbands—I don't know—but I could tell you of simple ways. A husband gives us children, a husband gives us beds and seats, dresses and perfumes and garlands, even fame in society and happiness in heaven. When he orders a maid to get something, get up and fetch it yourself. and don't be alone too much even with your own sons. Avoid women who drink, shout, steal, gorge and gossip. And learn how to make yourself attractive with ornaments, perfumes and unguents. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 3: Vana Parva: Draupadi -Satyabhama Samvad, Section CCXXXI)]

### *A Palimpsest and a Paradox*

In her analysis of *Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture (2011)*, Lakshmi Bandlamudi calls the exercise of remembering Draupadi an exceedingly complex task. She says that an excursion into the past to recall the epic heroine raises a whole range of questions about memory, representation, retrieval and about the patriarchal structure within which these mental activities take place (*Dialogics of Self* 111). According to her remembering Draupadi forces one to remember many social inequalities and injustices, therefore, some resist even recollecting her for fear of confronting patriarchy, while others use her, in Spivak's words, as a "shuttle" between the past and the present. Bandlamudi insists that the shuttle does not simply

link various time stations, but it also disrupts the structures of patriarchy in both the past and the present. “Draupadi as a character commands a whole range of contradictory meanings, as she goes all the way from a non-existent being of “nothingness” to a full-blown character, being both nowhere and everywhere and inhabiting multiple times”, says Bandlamudi (ibid)

Bandlamudi speaks of the phenomena of entering a hall of mirrors – when we enter the hall of mirrors, we see ourselves seeing ourselves. She compares Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* to the mirror capturing the reflection of other mirrors. “Innumerable are the reflections in this play of mirrors, and in the reflecting reflection we see both the mirror and the subject – Draupadi and womanhood – inseparable in our journey from the immediate present to the remote past”, says she (ibid). Bandlamudi finds Draupadi’s character as heterogeneous, contradictory and unfinalized, for like the contemporary woman, the epic heroine also exists on the periphery of the cultural system and is semiotically dynamic. Draupadi, according to Bandlamudi, is not simply constituted within the patriarchal structure, but also actively reclaimed and reconstituted in feminist discourses, making Draupadi a site for both instantiation and contestation of patriarchy, and a palimpsest and a paradox in the interpretive act of the readers (ibid 112).

The excursion into the past to recall Draupadi raises a whole range of questions about memory, representation, retrieval and about the patriarchal structure within which these mental activities take place, asserts Bandlamudi. She worries about the very existence of Draupadi in the memory storehouse, and if she does exist, then the questions are about her “location” and about the nature of representation in the individual and collective memory (ibid). In the interviews that she conducted, she found a sharp contrast between the recollections of other characters in *The Mahabharata* and the recollections of its heroine Draupadi. She found a significant 67 percent of the subjects saying that they either had no thoughts on Draupadi, or

they didn't care about her or even disliked her or simply reported the events in which she was the central figure.

Bandlamudi asks if Draupadi has disappeared from the memory storehouse, or whether she was never encoded in the memory to begin with, or is it a problem of retrieval, because recalling her would mean confronting some ugly gender questions and waging the gender battle, or is the memory in the Freudian sense repressed; the ego simply cannot handle the anxiety she produces. She queries if Draupadi is needed today in order to wage the ongoing gender battle, and if that is the case, should she be "reclaimed" and "reconstituted" to suit the individual and cultural needs (*Dialogics of Self* 141).

Bandlamudi observes that contemporary battered women and Draupadi don't exist as isolated characters, but they sometimes replace each other, sometimes they converge and talk to each other and sometimes they diverge. She draws our attention to multiple "gendered chronotopes" which can be observed in Draupadi's character: "In such a hegemonic discourse, Draupadi simply exists, neither in space nor in time. She is "homeless," so to speak, not deserving any authorized cultural space, nor does time enter the narrative in a true sense" (ibid 149).

Referring to 'time' in a Bakhtinian sense, Bandlamudi says that when time enters the narrative, one sees the historical emergence of the character. In a direct or "objectified discourse," "these days" and "those days" simply switch places, and patriarchy has existed in "those days" and "these days", therefore, when the interpretation is subjected to the patriarchal mould, time disappears, observes Bandlamudi (ibid 150). She says that the emergence of a character in all its complexities is a threat to the structures of patriarchy, therefore the "other" – the woman – has to be fixed at any cost. Bandlamudi agrees with feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) who offers a compelling argument about "time" in our discourse on women, wherein unlike other forms of oppression, "women have no memory of a "time before" – a

time before the masters came, a time before we were subjugated and ruled”(*Dialogics of Self* 150). “In a hegemonic discourse, patriarchal values determine her “absence” or her “presence” in a negative light, whereas in a dialogic discourse, the absence and the historical nature of her presence are contested and reconstituted”, says Bandlamudi (ibid 154). Draupadi is a victim of the politics of gender, shame and guilt, a trip that continues in the context of women folk in India, and the world over. The epic is like a palimpsest where one can read the faded text to understand oneself and one’s cultural past, to understand why we behave how we do on a day to day basis.

We construct our sense of ‘self’ as we dialogically ‘read’ the epic, transposing past incidents to present situations. The encoded cultural imprint is activated and deciphered as knowledge about self is constructed. In their work *A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (1990), I. M. Lotman, believes that a living culture cannot be otherwise, and in its collective memory, texts do not simply idle in its archives, but are active generators recreating its past and setting new directions for the future. He speaks of “spatial and topological laws” intrinsic in the mythic writings that accentuate the “structural laws of homeomorphism,” which allows the texts and readers to enter the “semiosphere,” where every code, every message, every action is read at multiple levels (152). He observes that the “topological world of myth is not discrete” and “when discreteness arises it is the result of an inadequate translation into the discrete metalanguages of a nonmythological type” (ibid). *The Mahabharata*, says Lotman, has acquired a “semiotic life,” serving triple functions as a bearer of meanings, a generator of new meanings and as a condenser of past meanings (ibid). Similarly, the great Epic is a discursive space which contains all by its own admission – *Yannehasti na tat kvachit* - What is not here, is nowhere else:

धर्मं चार्थं च कामे च मोक्षे च भरतर्षभ | यदिहास्ति तदन्यत्र यन्नेहास्ति न तत्क्वचित् ||३३||

(*The Mahabharata BORI* 1: 56:33)

Nietzsche, in his essay ‘*On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*’, points out: “We want to serve history to the extent that history serves life” (59). Remembering Draupadi is an exercise in decoding the prejudices that abound in our approach towards women. Draupadi never knew what it was to be a child; she, like Athena, emerged as a ravishing young woman from the flames of the sacrificial fire altar. Her beauty is emphasized upon in glorious terms:

नैवरूपा भवन्त्येवं यथा वदसि भामिनि | प्रेषयन्ति च वै दासीर्दासांश्चैवंविधान्बहून् ||९||  
 गूढगुल्फा संहतोरुस्त्रिगम्भीरा षडुन्नता | रक्ता पञ्चसु रक्तेषु हंसगद्गदभाषिणी ||१०||  
 सुकेशी सुस्तनी श्यामा पीनश्रोणिपयोधरा | तेन तेनैव सम्पन्ना काश्मीरीव तुरङ्गमा ||११||  
 स्वरालपक्ष्मनयना बिम्बोष्ठी तनुमध्यमा | कम्बुग्रीवा गूढसिरा पूर्णचन्द्रनिभानना ||१२||

*The Mahabharata BORI 4: 8: 9-12*

[Your heels are flat, your thighs are full, you are deep in the three places, high in the six, five in the five red spots, and your voice halts like a wild goose’s. Your hair is fine, your nipples are pretty, you are shapely, with full breasts and buttocks, you are endowed with every grace like a filly from Kashmir! Your eyelashes curl nicely, your lips are like bimba berries, your waist is slender, your throat lined like a conch shell, your veins are hidden, and your face is like the full moon! (*The Mahabharata* (trans. Van Buitenen) IV. 8.10-12]

Blessed with exceptional charisma, Draupadi had no equal on earth. The epic describes her as one with dark eyes as large as lotus petals, curly locks and with fragrance like that of a blue lotus, perceivable from miles. But this ethereal beauty was born as an after-thought, an extra. Her father’s ardent desire, the one for which the sacrificial ritual had taken place, was for a son who would kill Drona. But Draupadi’s birth was marked by an ominous warning, ‘In her will rise many fears!’ (Ganguli, *The Mahabharata* Book 1: Adi Parva: Chaitraratha Parva: Section CLXIX)

The myth related to the birth of Draupadi had dark connotations. The request of Drupada for a warrior son who would avenge his humiliation at the hands of Drona was turned

down by sage Upayaja, who said he does not take unethical assignments. He, instead, directed the King to his elder brother Yaja. This older sibling entertained no scruples in accepting impure things, being used to eating impure remnants of other people's feasts. He entertained no dislike for anything. The dark rites were not acceptable to sage Upayaja, but his elder brother, sage Yaja, the unclean, impure priest, keeping in mind Drupada's wealth and position, agreed to the task (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Chaitraratha Parva: Section CLXIX).

With such a priest officiating in a sacrifice for progeny, the dark rites began. So powerful was Yaja that he did not even need a woman's body to create what was asked for. The time had come for the mantras to bear fruit. As luck would have it, the queen was still getting ready, but the royal children could not wait to be born. So out from the blazing sacrificial fires emerged the much-coveted son - a great warrior clad with a natural coat of mails and equipped with divine weapons. He was called *Dhrishtadyumna*, because of his radiant complexion and his excessive audacity, as he rode around on his chariot, emitting war cries, challenging one and all. Then, to everyone's surprise, a dark body emerged from the fires, that of a young woman. When Draupadi was born an incorporeal voice pronounced the ominous warning:

This dark-complexioned girl will be the first of all women, and she will be the cause of the destruction of many Kshatriyas. Along with her many a fear will overtake the Kauravas! Because this daughter is so dark in complexion, she would be called Krishnaa - the Dark One! (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Chaitraratha Parva: Section CLXIX)

It is disturbing to note that no one missed Queen Sulochana, the wife of Drupada, who was excluded from the process of the birth. The male pride and prowess could turn a biological impossibility into a reality. Kevin McGrath points out the exceptional conditions of Draupadi's

birth in his book “*Strī: Feminine Power in the Mahābhārata*”, where he says, “To be born without a human mother is a sign of great inner strength and purity; usually this is a condition for males, as with Drona or Kripa or Aurva, and is rare for women” (McGrath 118).

Unlike the Draupadi in the epic, whose childhood was stolen by the meta-narrative, Divakaruni’s heroine was a young child waiting to be picked by a father who did not want a daughter. Unlike Dhrishtadyumna, Draupadi did not have a name of her own. Called Draupadi because she was the daughter of Drupada, and Yajnaseni because she was born to Yagyasena (another name of Drupada), she of the chequered destiny questions this anomaly from the pages of a re-telling:

“Couldn’t my father have come up with something a little less egoistic? Something more suited to a girl who was supposed to change history” (*The Palace of Illusions* 5)?

The Sanskrit word ‘Panchali’, meant a puppet, or a doll. This princess of the Kingdom of Panchala, though raised with the explicit purpose of getting married to the greatest warrior of the land, was anything but a puppet. Pratibha Ray’s Draupadi seizes the voice that was stolen from Vyasa’s Draupadi:

“From where shall I begin? My birth? But my birth was an exception. I was born nubile. The sacrificial altar is my mother. Yajnasena is my father. So, I am Yajnaseni” (*Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* 5).

Ray’s Yajnaseni regrets the fact that her life was a saga of revenge, for even before birth, she was destined to avenge her father’s insult. She was going to be the weapon for preserving dharma on this earth and destroying the wicked. She wonders if it was only woman who should be forced to be the medium for preserving dharma (*Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* 8).

Draupadi has been vilified on account of her agreeing to live with five husbands. "The gods allow one wife to a man. But Draupadi has five husbands. What sort of dharma is that?

Even stripping a woman like her should not shock anyone", declares Karna in the Sabha Parva.

He puts across his point of view in no uncertain terms:

If thou thinkest that bringing her hither attired in a single piece of cloth, is an action of impropriety, listen to certain excellent reasons I will give. O son of the Kuru race, the gods have ordained only one husband for one woman. This Draupadi, however, hath many husbands. Therefore, certain it is that she is an unchaste woman. To bring her, therefore, into this assembly attired though she be in one piece of cloth--even to uncover her is not at all an act that may cause surprise. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 2: Sabha Parva: Sisupala-badha Parva: Section LXVI)

The epic further records:

नाग्निस्तृप्यति काष्ठानां नापगानां महोदधिः |

नान्तकः सर्वभूतानां न पुंसां वामलोचनाः ||२५||

[Fire is never satiated with fuel. An ocean is never too full of water. Death is not satisfied even with all beings. Similarly, women can never have enough of men" (*The Mahabharata* XIII. 38. 25)].

Draupadi was taken to be one such woman who was never satisfied with men. A polyandrous marriage imposed on the woman who had no say in the matter, an alliance which was a matter of political exigency of the male members of the clan, remained attached to her like a lifelong stigma, earning her the reputation of being a nymphomaniac. Karna suggested that she should 'repair to the inner apartments of king Dhritarashtra and serve the king's relatives (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Sabha Parva: Sisupala-vadha Parva: Section LXX)'.

The general misogyny of the times was voiced by Karna who informed Draupadi that the slave and the wife were always dependent:



त्रयः किलेमे अधना भवन्ति; दासः शिष्यश्चास्वतन्त्रा च नारी |

दासस्य पत्नी त्वं धनमस्य भद्रे; हीनेश्वरा दासधनं च दासी ||१|| *The Mahabharata BORI 2:63:1*

Draupadi was reminded that she was part of the possessions of Yudhishtira, so, along with the rest of the property of Yudhishtira, she also was justly won. The act of Draupadi being dragged by Duhshasana, while she was menstruating and attired in a single piece of cloth was considered justified. It was said that even if she was totally naked it would not be an act of impropriety:

रजस्वला वा भव याज्ञसेनि; एकाम्बरा वाप्यथ वा विवस्त्रा |

द्यूते जिता चासि कृतासि दासी; दासीषु कामश्च यथोपजोषम् ||२७||

*The Mahabharata BORI 2:60:27*

A woman, says the epic, was never above suspicion. “Even if high-born, beautiful, and already married, women do not remain within the boundaries of propriety. This is a true fault of women” (*The Mahabharata* XIII. 38. 11). “The lack of availability of males keeps a woman in check. Otherwise, nothing could hold them back: not fear of sin, not compassion, not wealth, nor even affection for family” (*The Mahabharata* XIII.38. 18). “There is no man in this world to whom women will not go, O great sage”, informs Panchachuda, the celestial nymph, while enthusiastically reporting to Narada, the great sage, who wanted to know the real nature of womenfolk (*The Mahabharata* XIII. 38. 21). She dawdles and tries to skirt the issue, by saying that the nature of women was only too well known to everyone:

विदितास्ते स्त्रियो याश्च यादृशाश्च स्वभावतः | न मामर्हसि देवर्षे नियोक्तुं प्रश्न ईदृशे ||८||

*The Mahabharata* XIII.38.8

Narada asks her to tell her nothing but the truth, as false reporting will bring her discredit:

तामुवाच स देवर्षिः सत्यं वद सुमध्यमे | मृषावादे भवेद्दोषः सत्ये दोषो न विद्यते ||९||

*The Mahabharata* XIII.38.9

Thus, encouraged by Narada, Panchachuda enthusiastically launches into the said task. She informs Narada that just as fire was never satiated with fuel, an ocean was never too full of water, death was not satisfied even with all beings, similarly, women could never have enough of men (*The Mahabharata* XIII. 38. 25). The epic faithfully reflects the prejudices of the times:

न स्त्रीभ्यः किञ्चिदन्यद्वै पापीयस्तरमस्ति वै | स्त्रियो हि मूलं दोषाणां तथा त्वमपि वेत्थ ह ||१२||

समाज्ञातानृद्धिमतः प्रतिरूपान्वशे स्थितान् | पतीनन्तरमासाद्य नालं नार्यः प्रतीक्षितुम् ||१३||

असद्गर्भस्त्वयं स्त्रीणामस्माकं भवति प्रभो | पापीयसो नरान्यद्वै लज्जां त्यक्त्वा भजामहे ||१४||

*The Mahabharata BORI 13: 38: 12-14*

[There is nothing else that is more sinful than women. Verily, women are the root of all fault. They are exceedingly restless, for they always hanker after new companions. In consequence of their nature being unintelligible, they are incapable of being kept in obedience by affectionate treatment. Their disposition is such that they are incapable of being restrained when bent upon transgression. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Anusasana Parva, Section XXXVIII, Vol 11: 5)]

Vyasa's Draupadi, who was taken to be one such woman, never got to answer the aspersions raised on her character by Karna in the Sabha Parvan. Others tried to justify the arrangement.

The unique system of one woman marrying several men was explained by the story of a boon granted by Lord Mahadeva in which a young damsel, left unnamed in the epic, remained unmarried because of some past sins, and initiated severe ascetic penances to remedy the situation. Lord Mahadeva was appeased by her penance and promised her anything she wanted. The girl, in her excitement, repeated the word 'Pati' (husband) five times over, and was granted the boon of five husbands instead of one. Since the words of Shiva were immutable, she was born in the line of Drupada to fulfil that boon. This story, narrated by Sage Vyasa, assuaged

any guilt that surfaced amongst the Pandavas for having married the same woman (*The Mahabharata* 1.157.6–13).

Another narrative that attempted to justify this much-questioned act of polygamy was that of the five Indras, who found themselves at the mercy of Shiva. Named Vishwabruk, Bhutadhaman, Shivi, Shanti and Tejaswin, these five Indras were made prisoners for their excessive pride by Lord Mahadeva. The expiation led them to be born as the five Pandavas, who would fight the Kauravas and rid the earth of evil. The goddess Shri was designated to be their common wife, setting up precedence for Draupadi to be the common wife of the Pandavas. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Vaivahika Parva: Section CLXLIX)

Yet another story that justifies the polyandric alliance was that of Nalayani and her husband, sage Maudgalya. The sage was suffering from leprosy, but his wife took care of him without any revulsion. Pleased, the sage granted her a boon, and Nalayani asked for the sage to satisfy her in five handsome forms. Her insatiable lust made the sage curse her with rebirth, when she would have five partners (*Panchakanya: Women of Substance* 43). Her penance to Shiva ensured that she would become a virgin after spending time with each one. In another instance of validating the arrangement, Yudhishtira referred to the Puranas where a lady named Jatila of the Gotama race had married seven Rishis. He also narrates the story of an ascetic's daughter who had married with ten brothers all bearing the same name of Prachetas. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 1: Adi Parva: Vaivahika Parva: Section CLXLVIII)

Draupadi's role in the grand epic is brought out in Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*:

King Drupada! Whether it be pearls or flowers, they have to be strung into necklaces and garlands for adorning the neck of the deity....In the same fashion, for the

preservation of dharma in Aryavarta today, it is necessary for the five Pandavs to be strung together. Only your beautiful daughter Krishnaa is capable of keeping them tied together. Then where is the dilemma? (67)

Vyasa's Draupadi's may have remained silent, but we have Ray's Yajnaseni raising strong objection:

Why should I accept the other brothers as husbands? Would that not destroy my dharma? The very idea was ridiculous: one woman to live as the wife of five men! There would be no other such instance in the world. Why should I silently bear such an insult? Was I a lifeless statue? Lust-crazed by my beauty, bereft of reason and judgement, would these brothers impose upon me their whimsical authority and should I accept that? (*Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* 56)

Hearing Vyasa's verdict regarding her fate of marrying five at once and his boon of renewed virginity after every consummation the millennial Draupadi is incensed, and expresses her indignation in these words:

Though Dhai Ma tried to console me by saying that finally I had the freedom men had had for centuries, my situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not. (*The Palace of Illusions* 120)

Fraternal polyandry, where a woman was married to several brothers of the same consanguineal group, was an important step towards a shift from matriarchal culture to patriarchy facilitating the oppression of women, says Patil (in *Whose "Mahabharat"? A Point of View* 181). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak surmised that Draupadi's legitimised pluralisation was used to demonstrate male glory, which provides the occasion for a violent transaction between men, the efficient cause of the crucial battle (*In Other Worlds* 107). In her study on

the sexuality of women in the Hindu tradition, Arti Dhand (*Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage* 2009) finds Draupadi being subjected to the accepted notions and prejudices that were passed on in a Patrifocal society. Her polyandric marriage is seen as one that resolves the tension created by a younger brother's marriage before the elder brother gets married. Draupadi's beauty was such that it could create dissension amongst brothers. Hence her sexuality was to be reined in by the common ties of marriage, with a unique arrangement where the stakeholders enjoy the resource by turn.

With the help of Rishi Narada, says Dhand, the problem of seniority and privilege was solved, and it was decided that each brother will take turns with Draupadi, with the clause that if Draupadi is alone with any one of them, none of the others will intrude on the couple's privacy. This was how the taboo of incest was managed, and Draupadi's marriage with "men who ordinarily would relate to her either as father or son" was explained (*Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage* 119).

In *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, Iravati Karve presents the sociological reason behind Kunti's decision to let all five brothers marry Draupadi (45). According to her since the Vedic times a younger brother marrying before the elder brother was considered sinful because the eldest had the right of succession and inheritance and the duty (ibid). She says that the younger brothers could have children with the elder brother's wife, but not vice versa, because it was considered against accepted morals (ibid). Yudhishthira could marry Draupadi as it was his right according to the law of primogeniture. The desire that each had for Draupadi was evident, and so was the possibility of strife if she married only one of them. When Duryodhana asked Karna to sow the seeds of dissent amongst the Pandavas he pointed out the futility behind it, as now Draupadi had taken over the task that Kunti had so far i.e. watching over the Pandavas. The real character of Draupadi was supposed to be that of Shri – the Goddess of Prosperity, who saved the Pandavas from adversity.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1998) observes that no one blesses a bride to be like Draupadi, and it is always Sita who is the role model. Although Sita's life can hardly be called a happy one, she remains the ideal woman through whom the patriarchal values may be spread far and wide and through whom women may be taught to bear all injustice silently (*When Women Retell* 19). Draupadi did not become the ideal woman for posterity because she refused to remain silent. To what extent was her voice carried forward is for posterity to assess. Iravati Karve condemns the usage of the word 'Kritya' (ferocious, demonic female) for Draupadi in the Jain Puranas, which insist that she was the reason behind *The Mahabharata* War: "In the Kritayuga Renuka was Kritya, In the Satyayuga Sita was Kritya, In the Dvaparayuga Draupadi was Kritya, and in the Kaliyuga there are Krityas in every house" (*Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* 50).

Karve insists that Draupadi was definitely not the prime cause of the war in the grand epic. *The Mahabharata* was a civil war between clans of relatives. The real reason was the greed for land by the Kauravas, and the denial of the throne to Dhritarashtra because of his disability. The motto was still revenge. "How little did Draupadi matter can be seen in Krishna's offer to give her and a share of the kingdom to Karna if he would join the Pandavas. Fortunately, Draupadi had no inkling of this contemptible bargain" (ibid 51).

Sara Mitter (1991), in her work "*Dharma's Daughters: Contemporary Indian Women and Hindu Culture*" posits: "In general, Draupadi strikes a more modern chord than does Sita. Less malleable and less accommodated to her sufferings than Sita is, Draupadi is also a more powerful personality: quick-witted and confident" (96). Sally J. Sutherland (1989) finds Draupadi's aggression being made public. She tasks her husbands with impossible feats and revels in their success, gets angry and doesn't mince words when they fail. She finds Draupadi's aggression being directed outwards towards her husbands, especially Yudhisthira. Sutherland observes that since the tradition is uncomfortable with such undisguised aggression,

especially associated with a woman, Draupadi is seen with jaundiced eyes. She says that Sita, on the other hand, expresses her anger at her love object inwardly, and this manner of handling aggression, i.e., through masochistic actions, appears to be more socially normative in ancient and modern India for both men and women (*Sita and Draupadi: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role-Models* 79).

Comparing Draupadi with Sita, Iravati Karve (2007) points out the fact that there were many similarities between the tragic tales of these protagonists of two of the greatest works of Human history. Both were born of sacrificial rituals, raised by foster fathers, participated in a marriage by self-choice (Swayamvara), got married to the best archers of the times, exiled and lived unhappy lives. But the personalities and response of Sita and Draupadi to their adverse circumstances were entirely different. Karve points out that *Ramayana*, the great Kavya written by Valmiki, visualized an ideal world, and Sita definitely was an ideal wife. Adored by Rama, she did not suffer from divided loyalties, whereas Draupadi right from the beginning was committed to the *raison de tre* of her birth – revenge. And to fulfil this aim she accepted the unique arrangement of five husbands instead of the one who had ‘won’ her:

Her sorrows, her humiliations are realistic; they are not merely brought in to embellish the poetry; and their resolution takes place on the level of the real world. Sita was a daughter of the earth because she came out of the earth; Draupadi was a true daughter of the earth because her feet were firmly planted on the ground, her heart was in the world defined by her marriage and family within the boundaries of her father’s house, father-in-law’s house, her own palace. (*Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* 52)

Iravati Karve says that though both Draupadi and Sita were daughters of the earth, Sita was the ideal woman, whereas Draupadi’s exile was shadowed by hatred and suffering (ibid 45). Sita was far from any kind of hate agenda, whereas Draupadi did not rest in peace. If Sita was born out of the earth, Draupadi emerged from fire. Sita was a sati, a chaste woman whereas

Draupadi has been openly called a whore (*Panchakanya: Women of Substance* 27). This contradiction has been brought into sharp relief by Nibir Ghosh who points to the two archetypes that have dominated Indian literature since time immemorial. He says:

“There is silent suffering with utmost loyalty to man in the Sita type and woman as an individual demanding justice in the Draupadi type. Sita absorbs all inflicted miseries and humiliation of the male ego, whereas Draupadi challenges the male ego to the epitomic limits of human excellence. Sita accepts, accommodates and withdraws. Draupadi resents, rejects and involves herself in the process of life as a protagonist.”

(*Mirror from the Indus* 197)

Ghosh reiterates that both Sita and Draupadi are strong, independent individuals and survivors and role-models - the quiet dignity of Sita a perfect foil for the strong determination of Draupadi. Both Sita and Draupadi are acclaimed because of their steely resolve to make the best out of the situation they were in. Instead of playing the victim Draupadi mobilized the resources available to her, and emerged not just the survivor, but one who bailed the Pandavas out. Karna, her ace distractor, gets to acknowledge her presence:

अप्लवेऽम्भसि मग्नानामप्रतिष्ठे निमज्जताम् |

पाञ्चाली पाण्डुपुत्राणां नौरैषा पारगाभवत् ||३|| *The Mahabharata BORI* 2:64: 3

(Indeed, the princess of Panchala, becoming as a boat unto the sons of Pandu who were sinking in a boat-less ocean of distress, hath brought them in safety to the shore.” *The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 2: Sabha Parva: Sisupala-badha Parva: Section LXXI)

Ironically, this makes Bhima angry, and he asks Arjuna as to how Draupadi, after all that has happened, is of any use to them:

त्रीणि ज्योतीषि पुरुष इति वै देवलोऽब्रवीत् | अपत्यं कर्म विद्या च यतः सृष्टाः प्रजास्ततः ||५||

अमध्ये वै गतप्राणे शून्ये ज्ञातिभिरुज्झिते | देहे त्रितयमेवैतत्पुरुषस्योपजायते ||६||



तन्नो ज्योतिरभिहतं दाराणामभिमर्शनात् | धनञ्जय कथं स्वित्स्यादपत्यमभिमृष्टजम् ||७||

*The Mahabharata BORI 2:64: 5-7*

[Hearing these words of Karna in the midst of the Kurus,--viz., that the sons of Pandu were saved by their wife,--the angry Bhimasena in great affliction said (unto Arjuna), -'O Dhananjaya, it hath been said by Devala three lights reside in every person, viz., offspring, acts and learning... But the light that is in us hath been dimmed by this act of insult to our wife. How, O Arjuna, can a son born from this insulted wife of ours prove serviceable to us? (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Book 2: Sabha Parva: Sisupala-badha Parva: Section LXXI)]

Bhima's utterance reflects the patriarchal anxiety about the purity of a woman and her sexual conduct. Manu cautions that women should especially be guarded against addictions, even trifling ones, for unguarded women would bring sorrow upon both families. Guarding the wife is the supreme duty of the husband, and even weak ones fulfil this duty by guarding their wives. "For by zealously guarding his wife he guards his own descendants, practices, family, and himself, as well as his own duty" (*The Laws of Manu*, IX: 5-7, 197). Manu says that the husband enters the wife to be born again through her. The wife bears a son who is just like the man whose seed she carries in her field. "A man should guard his wife to keep his progeny clean" (*The Laws of Manu*, IX: 8-9, 197-98). Bhima's unease regarding the chastity of Draupadi now that she may be sexually violated by the Kauravas was palpable. Blaming a woman for the misfortune that befell her because of patriarchal abuse has a long ancestry.

Draupadi's commodification was complete when she was staked in the game of dice. Her physical attributes were described as that of a prize animal: "She who is neither short nor tall, neither spare nor corpulent, possessed of blue curly locks, slender waist like that of the wasp, of red lips, and body without down. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Sabha Parva: Sisupala-badha Parva: Section LXIV). As the stake was won by the Kauravas

and the public humiliation of Draupadi began, the elders in the royal court watched her being dragged down by Duhshasana, menstruating, clad in a single raiment:

एकवस्त्रा अधोनीवी रोदमाना रजस्वला |

सभामागम्य पाञ्चाली श्वशुरस्याग्रतोऽभवत् ||१५||

*The Mahabharata BORI 2: 60: 15*

Draupadi had tried to ward off the public humiliation by asking her famous question – “Who was won first - Yudhishtira or I?” She asked the messenger to go back to the royal assembly and confirm who was staked and won first:

“गच्छ त्वं कितवं गत्वा सभायां पृच्छ सूतज | किं नु पूर्वं पराजैषीरात्मानं मां नु भारत ||७||

एतज्ज्ञात्वा त्वमागच्छ ततो मां नय सूतज ||७||”

*The Mahabharata BORI 2: 60: 7*

But this did not save her from being brought to the royal assembly by force. Draupadi, the queen of the Pandavas, was dragged by the hair by Duhshasana:

ततो जवेनाभिससार रोषा; द्युःशासनस्तामभिर्गर्जमानः |

दीर्घेषु नीलेष्वथ चोर्मिमत्सु; जग्राह केशेषु नरेन्द्रपत्नीम् ||२२||

*The Mahabharata BORI 2: 60: 22*

The social conditioning was such that even in that condition Vyasa’s Draupadi was not able to lay the blame directly on the Pandavas. Though her question as to who was staked and lost first - Yudhishtira or Draupadi - consigned the elders in the royal court to an embarrassed silence, Draupadi in the meta-narrative kept insisting that Yudhishtira was not at fault, as he was now bound by the obligations of morality, and morality was subtle. She was unwilling to admit that Yudhishtira was wrong in putting her at stake, but through her question she communicated volumes. Of the ones present there only two people – Vidura and Vikarna - condemned the act. Vidura supported Draupadi’s assertion that she could not be enslaved as

she was staked by Yudhishtira after he himself was won over. The tragedy of being a woman was that Draupadi, though blessed with a razor-sharp intellect, though a royal daughter and daughter-in-law, could not prevent the abuse. If the royal daughter-in-law could face the horror of a public molestation, one can imagine the plight of the commoner (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Sabha Parva: Sisupala-badha Parva: Section LXV).

Draupadi should have raged against the injustice. This firebrand could not have taken things lying down. But instead of giving vent to her anger and frustration the meta-narrative makes Draupadi support patriarchal moorings by saying that the ‘illustrious’ Yudhishtira was not at fault because he was summoned to the Kaurava court as part of a nefarious design. Draupadi maintained that Yudhishtira did not put her at stake voluntarily but was deceived by the Kauravas in doing so:

The king was summoned to this assembly and though possessing no skill at dice, he was made to play with skilful, wicked, deceitful and desperate gamblers. How can he say then to have staked voluntarily? The chief of the Pandavas was deprived of his senses by wretches of deceitful conduct and unholy instincts, acting together, and then vanquished. He could not understand their tricks, but he hath now done so. (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Sabha Parva: Sisupala-badha Parva: Section LXVI).

One is touched at Draupadi’s attempt to cover up for the blundering Yudhishtira. Draupadi had earlier appealed to the sense of propriety of the Kaurava elders who kept quiet, scared of Duryodhana’s wrath. As Duhshasana was ordered to drag Draupadi indoors, she made one last effort and tried to buy time through sarcasm, hoping against hope that it would save her from the unfortunate situation that she was in. She claimed that she had a task left to perform--a high duty that had not been undertaken by her yet. She informed them that the

circumstances of her entry were such that she could not salute the venerated elders in the Kaurava assembly.

Draupadi's desperate measure failed to have any immediate impact on the assembly of elders, but she persisted. She reminded them that she had never been seen in public before, except when the Swayamvara was organised and the assembled Kings had the opportunity to see her. She had never been watched by even the sun and the wind. Being the Kaurava daughter-in-law she was not worthy of such treatment. Draupadi blamed her fate and bad times, lamenting that 'though high-born and chaste', she was subjected to this treatment.

Ultimately Bhishma was compelled to respond to her desperate query whether she was won or not by the Kauravas. In a cryptic answer he informed the gathering that morality was subtle and what a strong man called morality was different from a weak person's version. Bhishma refused to comment as to what was morality, and passed the buck on to Yudhisthira, claiming he was an authority on Dharma (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli Sabha Parva: Sisupala-badha Parva: Section LXVIII). Emboldened by the silence of the Pandavas and the non-involvement of the elders like Bhishma, Drona and Dhritarashtra, the worst trial of Draupadi began when Duhshasana tried to remove her clothes in full view of all present in the royal assembly. Clad in a single sheet of cloth, as was the custom of the times for women who were menstruating, Draupadi symbolised the helplessness that was a woman's lot and the boundary-violation that resulted out of the male proprietorship of women's bodies. Though the folk versions show Lord Krishna coming to Draupadi's rescue, the Critical edition of *The Mahabharata* does not mention his intervention. Ghosh and Singh refer to the miraculous appearance of a new garment in place of the old one, and link it to the notion of a transcendental signified, the centre of the epic, the protector of Dharma, who came to his devotee's aid in her moment of crisis. While critiquing Saoli Mitra's 'Nathavati Anathvat', Ghosh and Singh find

her echoing Derrida's critique of western metaphysics and deconstruction of the notion of centre in a structure (Reconstructing Draupadi 19).

'Who was staked and lost first'? This famous question asked by Draupadi in the Sabha Parva underlines the nature of self and the denial of the rights of a woman. Was she a property of man? Did Yudhisthira have the right to stake her as a pawn in the game of dice? Draupadi did not think so and mentions it in no uncertain terms. But her question is not answered by anyone - not her husbands, nor the elders in the royal court.

Her situation reminds us of what Luce Irigaray (1985) has talked about in a different context. Irigaray finds women being circulated as products in the existing social order, their status being that of merchandise or commodities. She regrets the fact that women must be consigned to the status of an infrastructure unrecognized by our society and our culture. She says that the use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as subjects (*This Sex Which is Not One* 84). Draupadi resisted this objectification and attempted to break free with her famous Question. If Yudhisthira had lost himself first, having become a slave he was not entitled to stake her at all. Even if he had staked her first while he was still a free man, he still had no right to do that as she was not his property. Yet since the androcentric society of the times believed in the absolute superiority of men it was difficult for the elders in the assembly to put Yudhisthira in the dock for having staked his wife, who they thought was definitely his property, to be sold, bartered, pawned or retained as per choice. A woman is treated as her body, to be inscribed by patriarchy according to the age-old prejudices that mark the system.

In her famous work "*Volatile Bodies: Towards A Corporeal Feminism*", Elizabeth Grosz (1994) describes bodies as given entities that precede history and culture. She thinks of bodies as the products of the specific historical, social and cultural circumstances that exist at

any given point of time. Speaking about the discursive nature of bodies, Grosz observes that the body cannot be comprehended as a historical, precultural or natural object, as they are inscribed, marked and engraved by social pressures external to them. She points out that they are the products of the very social constitution of nature itself. “It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type”, says Grosz (283).

Draupadi’s body was inscribed by the paternalistic discourse which was not confined to one woman or even one generation. Analysing the Draupadi Question, Hildebeitel (2000) has rightly pointed out that Draupadi is asking a woman’s question, if not the woman’s question (*Is the Goddess a Feminist?* 116). The male power politics that was played on the woman’s body, in this case Draupadi’s, was inscribed by the misogynistic notions of superiority based on sex, a cultural construct. Grosz finds the material body intricately linked with various cultural and historical representations. These representations and cultural inscriptions quite literally constitute and produce the body. She contends that women have been objectified because of the denigration the female body (*Volatile Bodies Introduction* xiv). She challenges the patriarchal conceptions that have constructed a false essentialist identity for women. Grosz maintains that as a discipline, philosophy has surreptitiously excluded femininity, and ultimately women, from its practices through its usually implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body. She argues that philosophy as we know it has established itself as a form of knowing, a form of rationality, only through the disavowal of the body, and the corresponding elevation of mind as a disembodied term (ibid 4). She contends that misogynist thought tends to ascribe women a position of inferiority by constructing and representing their bodies as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control (ibid 13).

The patriarchal fear of a physiological process is evident in the ritual pollution that Draupadi was supposed to have been undergoing. This prejudice has been well - documented in Manu Smriti: “Women were created to bear children, and men to carry on the line (*The Laws of Manu*, IX: 96, 209). The sexuality of women was always suspect, and menstrual blood was a powerful reminder of the same. Manu warns of the dangers of co-habiting with a menstruating woman: “Even if he is out of his mind (with desire) he should not have sex with a woman who is menstruating; he should not even lie down in the same bed with her. A man who has sex with a woman awash in menstrual blood loses his wisdom, brilliant energy, strength, eyesight, and long life. By shunning her when she is awash in menstrual blood, he increases his wisdom, brilliant energy, strength, eyesight, and long life (*The Laws of Manu*, IV: 40-42, 78. 240).

In his work ‘*Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency*’ Jasbir Jain (2011) draws attention to the exclusionary rituals in the *Upanishads*. He believes that the exclusionary rituals are related to the female body, which because of its seductiveness, vulnerability, the flow of menstrual blood and the act of giving birth is seen as impure. Jain regrets that other practices piled themselves on this initial exclusion, which became a base for other social and mental exclusions (Jain 16.) Bhishma, while advising Yudhisthira regarding the true nature of women says that women should always be protected from temptations and opportunities of every kind. He says that there are two types of women – virtuous and sinful. The women with good conduct are highly blessed. They are maternal. They preserve and protect:

स्त्रियः साध्व्यो महाभागाः संमता लोकमातरः |

धारयन्ति महीं राजन्निमां सवनकाननाम् ||१९||

*The Mahabharata BORI 13:43: 19*

On the other hand, there are women who are sinful, of wicked behaviour, wedded to sinful resolves, expressive of the evil that is in them, and controlling them is the only way of protecting them:

असाध्यश्चापि दुर्वृत्ताः कुलघ्न्यः पापनिश्चयाः | विज्ञेया लक्षणैर्दुष्टैः स्वगात्रसहजैर्नृप ||२०||

एवमेतासु रक्षा वै शक्या कर्तुं महात्मभिः | अन्यथा राजशार्दूल न शक्या रक्षितुं स्त्रियः ||२१||

*The Mahabharata BORI 13:43: 20-21*

The epic reports the misogyny:

Women, O chief of men, are fierce. They are endued with fierce prowess. They have none whom they love or like so much as they have sexual congress with them. Women are like those (Atharvan) incantations that are destructive of life. Even after they have consented to live with one, they are prepared to abandon him for entering into engagements with others. They are never satisfied with one person of the opposite sex, O son of Pandu! (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Anusasana Parva, Section XLIII, Vol 11: 16)

Bhishma is not alone in his misogynism. This patronising attitude towards women is universal and gets reflected in the discourse frequently. Draupadi, though ‘*Ayonijasambhava*’ (not born of a woman), is still a woman, and is subject to the exclusionary politics and ritual pollution that shows a woman her place in the body politic. The anxiety that men face when it came to the issue of a menstruating woman reeks of cultural taboos.

Aparna Mandal suggests that Draupadi’s entry as a menstruating woman into the assembly-hall has revolutionary implications in the signifying practice of representation. She says that menstruation here has an explicit association with female sexuality, and if the assembly-hall is the symbolic domain of phallogocentric power where the rule of the phallus reigns supreme, then Draupadi’s entry enacts a moment of rupture within that discourse by substituting it with the alternative signifying code of feminine mystery, metaphorically



represented by the bleeding vagina which carries connotations of fluidity as opposed to the one-dimensionality of the erect phallus. This is because the woman's bodily fluid, in this case her menstrual blood, is not only perceived as a threat because of its so-called polluting power, but it also becomes a statement of oppression. Speaking of the western cultural fear of bodily fluids, Mandal agrees with Grosz who says:

What is disturbing about the viscous or the fluid is its refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity—the very notion that governs our self - representations and understanding of the body. It is not that female sexuality is like, resembles, an inherently horrifying viscosity. Rather, it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations. (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 195)

Draupadi, a woman with a voice in the epic, a speaking subject, could not prevent what followed next – a public humiliation and an attempt to strip her in the presence of her husbands, who, in their attempt to abide by the code of conduct of the dice game, sat through the worst fate that could befall a woman. It is worth investigating why Draupadi's question/dilemma remain unanswered. It was not explained by a Rishi's curse, or any other back story that have made their appearance in the epic several times over. It is difficult to believe that the narrators wanted to silence the debate and establish that women actually were the property of men, to be won or lost at will. Or did the epic leave the question dangling, a dilemma to be resolved by subsequent generations, as in so many other situations.

*The Mahabharata* did not speak in terms of ideal behaviour. It did not boast of role - models like Rama or Lakshmana. The aim here was to lay life bare, full-blooded, warts and all, and present the dilemma for posterity to discuss and attempt to solve if possible. Teaching

happened through negative examples as much as positive, and no picture was just black or white. According to one's dharma, depending on one's station or gender or caste or class, or for that matter on the situation, one decided on the course of action.

Being Draupadi was being marked by contradictions – a royal princess yet a forest-dweller, a woman who was ambitious enough to think beyond her immediate surroundings, a 'Pativrata' (faithful to the husband) married to five, in a unique relationship of friendship and devotion to Lord Krishna – Draupadi was a construct, discursively formed and inscribed by the social milieu of the times. We read more about Draupadi in the silences and omissions of the Great epic, in the cracks and crevices hidden from public view as they were uncomfortable for the establishment. The retellings have attempted to bridge this gap. For example, Pratibha Ray's Draupadi questions the status quo: "What respect for tradition and culture? Elders must not be spoken ill of, while petty persons are insulting and outraging his wife...Is this the evidence of the great Bharata civilization?" (*Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* 239)?

Draupadi is shocked by the ability of the Pandavas to stick to that tradition as they watch her being tortured and humiliated. Draupadi, says Ray, is ostracized by her question. As a gendered subaltern, Draupadi should not have dared speak. She should have pleaded for mercy – that would have been the expected response of a gendered subaltern. But Draupadi questioned the treatment meted out to her, and this was not tolerated by the patriarchs (238). A woman, answering back to the powers that be, was unprecedented and uncalled for.

Hiltebeitel finds Draupadi's question a philosophical one about the nature of Self, as according to him she was asking a question that was everywoman's question (*Is the Goddess a Feminist?* 115-116). It was a generational bias that continued unabated because of the support and collusion of the powers that be. In his work titled *Modern Hindu Thought*, Arvind Sharma defined Dharma as "a multivalent word which stands for cosmic order, normative order, law, morality and allied significations" (364). *Dharma*, according to Sharma, is untranslatable in

English, keeping in mind the nuances that it implies (ibid). Draupadi defaulted from following the 'Pativrata Dharma' when she openly questioned Yudhisthira's act of putting her at stake in the game of dice in the Kaurava court. That is why when she questions the violation of Dharma, she is never answered, just silenced. "What is left of the Dharma of Kings? This ancient, eternal Dharma is lost amongst the Kauravas!", laments Draupadi (*The Mahabharata BORI* 2.62.12). Ray's Yajnaseni too asks the same inevitable question, "Has anyone ever done such a detestable act in the history of the world?" (*Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* 234). Both are met with silence, supporting the statement of Cixous: 'Muffled throughout their history, women have lived in dreams, in bodies, though muted, in silences, in aphonic revolts', observes Cixous (*The Laugh of the Medusa* 886).

Attempts have been made to understand the dichotomy that arises by the depiction of women as weak, devious and dependent versus the portrayal of epic heroines as resourceful characters who emerge in control despite adverse situations. Draupadi, Kunti, Satyawati and Madhavi were females with strong personalities who had taken the reign of their social and sexual conduct in their own hands. This riddle is explained by Stephanie Jamison (1996) who finds the answer in the dyad of asceticism and eroticism. She observes that the idealization of asceticism so characteristic of later Hinduism is present, in one form or another, from the earliest period, and one of the most powerful forms of ascetic practice is the control of sexuality, the retention of semen. This ideal male figure, says Jamison, is the victim of sex, never seeking it or even welcoming it when it is offered, hence the ideological effort to preserve the image of man as the desireless ascetic leads to locating active sexuality in the female, who chooses her unwitting partner, pursues, badgers, and seduces him, and enjoys sex all by herself (*Sacrificed wife/sacrificer's wife* 16).

These strong women who have the energy, decision, and intelligence necessary for prodding a reluctant and passive partner into sex cannot be ideologically confined to the sexual

arena alone, says Jamison. She speculates that this gives rise to “the spectacle of a culture that professes to believe women are weak and silly, embracing fictional females whose control of legal niceties or strategic planning far surpasses that of the men who surround them” (ibid 17).

Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* set the template of maintaining control through obedience and acquiescence, but one does wonder if it was the same woman who spoke her mind in the Sabha Parvan, raising the question of a woman’s power over her body and self. She was also unlike the Draupadi who questioned Yudhishthira about his lost sense of self-assertion and informed him that this was not the time for forgiveness. The Draupadi who could hold her own in a debate, who had been called a ‘Pandita’, was dumbed down in a patriarchal debate to elevate the position of the ‘gods’ that she was supposed to serve.

### *The Semiotics of Shame*

Amongst the post-colonial authors attempting to re-write the myth of Draupadi, Mahasweta Devi comes to the fore with her short story, “Draupadi” (*Breast Stories* 2010), where the protagonist is an adivasi woman by the same name. With a warrant against her name and her dead husband Dulna used as a bait by the police, Draupadi, called Dopdi in the first part of the story, is a fugitive from law. Sun-burnt, dark and emaciated, Dopdi is almost a destitute: “with some rice knotted into her belt [...] as she walked, she picked out and killed the lice in her hair” (397).

Draupadi feared the ‘Make up’ and ‘kounter’, lingo that the hegemonic state had invented to cover-up the heinous rape and encounter respectively – tools of intimidation routinely used to silence the marginal. “When they kounter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed, your sex is a terrible wound” (ibid 397). In this case the immediate reason of the counter was the attack on the landowner who had blocked access to water to the tribal people. Senanayak, the military officer, explains: “Is it only the opposition that should find power at the end of the barrel of a gun? Arjan Singh's power also explodes out

of the male organ of a gun” (ibid 393). The arms of the state were not lifted to protect the downtrodden, but to ensure the protection of those who felt they were entitled because of their superiority in terms of caste, class or creed.

Dopdi was committed to the ideology of struggle against the narcissistic state which represented the ‘haves’ and persecuted the ‘have-nots’. She was singularly placed against ‘Senanayak’, the army officer who had been given the task of capturing Dopdi, alive or dead. Since a dead Dopdi could be of no use to him as she would not speak, the instructions were to catch her alive, and torture her till she gave away the whereabouts of the other cadre involved in the insurgency. But she was committed to silence and secrecy, which was not broken even when she was finally traced: “By my life Dulna, by my life. Nothing must be told” (*Breast Stories* 399). Even when she was “made up”, i.e. brutally raped by several men at the instigation of the Senanayak. Devi’s words bring out the pathos and the agony of the marginal: “Indeed, she’s made up right. Her breasts are bitten raw, the nipples torn. How many? Four-five-six-seven —active Pistons of flesh rise and fall... then Draupadi had passed out” (ibid 401).

Neluka Silva says that Pistons, a euphemism for the penis, are a weapon of domination, instrumental in Dopdi’s destruction. “Male dominance and military power, as well as the masculinist character of the state, are reconstituted in the narrative through the emphatically military register. A deliberate choice of linguistic devices stresses the close relationship between patriarchal and state/military/nationalist jargon” (*Narratives of Resistance* 60).

Unlike Draupadi in the Patriarchal epic, no Krishna came to Dopdi’s rescue. “Mahasweta Devi’s commitment to politics implied that the bounds of the aesthetic must be transgressed to allow for addressing political concerns”, says Silva (ibid 54). The Dopdi of Mahasweta Devi, though torn and bleeding, had the last word. The guards are perplexed by her behaviour when she gets up, unfazed by the brutal assault:

Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. Tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, she's gone crazy, and runs for orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly. Draupadi stands before Senanayak, naked. Thigh and pubic hair matted with dry blood. Two breasts, two wounds - The object of your search, Dopdi Mejhen. You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me? Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts. (*Breast Stories* 196)

At this moment in the narrative since Dopdi has lost everything, her last gesture of defiance becomes a moment of triumph.

Mary Daly (1978) finds patriarchal violence impotent, and such impotence manifests itself in leering at feminized victims everywhere, in attempting to penetrate, to pierce into an inner reality which the invader yearns to destroy but cannot even find:

The rapist breaks into matter, rips and tears, yet moves further from the being of his victim. As a consequence of his invasions, her consciousness is fragmented, so that she loses the thread of connectedness in her being. This culture of split consciousness is the world of sado-masochism. (*Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* 243)

Silva discusses the restrictions placed upon women by the nation-state, juxtaposed against the issue of female subjectivity. She draws attention to the dominant myths of femininity which become a vehicle for mediating notions of female behaviour. Devi's protagonist's suffering, says Silva, enables her to go beyond the boundaries of myth, so that in the short story "Draupadi" the mythical figure is reconstructed as Dopdi to produce a counter-narrative by deploying the female body and sexuality as the locus of resistance: "In selecting the Draupadi myth as a model for the subaltern woman, Devi calls attention to the politics of myth, of how some myths are privileged like the Sita myth, while the ambiguities within others (like the Draupadi myth) marginalise women. (*Narratives of Resistance* 61)

A momentary correspondence in the defencelessness of the patriarchal epic's heroine and the revolutionary Dopdi has been observed by Jayatilleke. Mahashweta's Dopdi does not rely on a male God or her husband or any other male. Instead, her body, the repository for male actions, becomes active and terrifying and the wounds of war become aggressive when she pushes Senanayak with her breasts, demonstrating how the biological life of human beings becomes subject to political decisions and objectification (*Narratives of Resistance* 1). Katharpi points out that in the aftermath of rape, when Dopdi raises her voice against her oppressors it destroys the connivance of silence surrounding rape and foregrounds how guilt should reside in the perpetrator, and not the victim (ibid 69).

By disallowing her rape and nakedness to suppress her, but deploying the rape as a weapon, Devi inverts the whole system of significations that the epic is based upon. "This body gestures towards a feminist emancipatory politics which exceeds the patriarchal determinations of the Naxalite movement and nation-state ideology", says Silva (ibid 62). She emphasizes on the fact that conventionally, the physical manifestation of female identity and subjectivity reside in the breasts, and Dopdi's nakedness represents the subaltern resistance against the very institutions – the state, family, religion – that define notions of "respectability" and class-marked codes of female behaviour (ibid 63). Like Vyasa's Draupadi, Devi's protagonist is situated at the point of break down between myth and its "real-life" context and finds that it is through extreme, "terrifying" measures that one can secure agency, says Silva (ibid).

Speaking of the sexist bias inherent in language, Dale Spender, in her work '*Man Made Language*' (1980), identifies the changes that can be brought about through women's participation in the process of meaning-formation through a revolutionary use of language. She says that since men have had a monopoly on the production of meaning it has been easy to sustain the belief that there is just one, single reality, and with the enforced silence of women

any possible alternatives have been pre-empted so that the mono-dimensional male view of the world has usually been accepted by both the sexes as the only view of the world ( 62-63). While discussing the reinterpretation of myth in Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi", Nidhi Sharma finds Devi reversing the semiotics of these signs to incarnate a sense of bewilderment, incomprehension and scare amongst the male-dominated societal hierarchies (Sharma 6). Amreeta Syam powerfully communicates the pain of the princess of Panchalas in her poem "Draupadi":

"Draupadi has five husbands — but she has none —  
She had five sons — and was never a mother...  
The Pandavas have given Draupadi...  
No joy, no sense of victory  
No honour as wife  
No respect as mother —  
Only the status of a Queen...  
But they have all gone  
And I'm left with a lifeless jewel  
And an empty crown...  
my baffled motherhood  
Wrings its hands and strives to weep."

Silva points out that Devi's authorial license affords her the luxury of delving into the impossible.

Her fictionalized treatment of the abject body is an acute reminder that, despite the real and serious violence that must be actively resisted, agency can be exercised from some marginal positions. Representing that body allows her to bear witness to the history of violence against a marginalized group while simultaneously carving out spaces for the exercise of agency by a refashioned, though still obviously violated, subaltern subject (*Narratives of Resistance* 63).



Pesso-Miquel regrets that “by breathing life into fictional characters, literature turns the anonymous, global statistics of horror into individualized, personal case studies, mixing the private and the public, and even if very often fiction can only helplessly record oppression” (*Addressing Oppression in Literature* 150). This has been questioned by Arroyo (2018) who asserts that within his/her otherness the colonized/subordinate/subaltern has constantly exercised and still exercises resistance to the dominant power, and though the subordinate cannot speak within the hegemonic discourse, this does not mean that she has no power or voice (*A Deconstruction of The Mahabharata* 22).

The pain of being denied a ‘home’, of not being able to ‘belong’ is a phenomenon as old as the hills. In the Indian milieu a woman is definitely a guest in her paternal home, her father’s biggest apprehension being her ‘happy’ settling down in her marital abode. She is supposedly a queen of her ‘own’ (her husband’s) homestead. Reality speaks otherwise, with scores of examples of women neither belonging here, nor there. Her father’s home belongs to her brother, and her happy stay in her husband’s home depends on her ‘behaving’ like a wife and a dependant. The illusion of her husband’s home being her own has made many a woman homeless, including Draupadi who lost her Palace of Illusions. She felt trapped in her father’s palace which was functional and unimaginative. Divakaruni’s Draupadi promised herself a place of her own:

When I had my own palace, I promised myself, it would be totally different. I closed my eyes and imagined a riot of colour and sound, birds singing in mango and custard apple orchards, butterflies flittering among jasmines, and in the midst of it—but I could not imagine yet the shape that my future home would take... I only knew that it would mirror my deepest being. There I would finally be at home. (*The Palace of Illusions* 7)

Draupadi is aware of the true nature of myths filtered through the gauge of time. She says:

Were the stories we told each other true? Who knows? At the best of times, a story is a slippery thing. Perhaps that was why it changed with each telling. Or is it the nature of all stories, the reason for their power? (ibid 15)

Deshpande's Draupadi knows that her place in the scheme of things is residual. She understands that she is a marginal when she says realises that she is insignificant in the entire scheme of things:

It's begun. They are already preparing, they have decided on war, they know there will be war. But why, then, did they not tell me that? Why did they make me believe it is my decision, my doing? Why? (*Writing from the Margin* 245)

This Draupadi views things from a new perspective:

Myths are still important to us. We do not want to demolish them. On the other hand, if we are not able to make them meaningful to our lives, they will cease to survive. We are looking for a fresh knowledge of ourselves in them, trying to discover what is relevant to our lives today. (ibid 99-100)

Ray's Draupadi questions the historical burden that she had been bearing, of being unchaste because of her polyandric alliance:

Chaste woman! Unchaste woman! In the same way why don't scriptures speak of chaste men and unchaste men? Are men's hearts made of gold that sin cannot tarnish them? Have the scriptures prescribed lists of sins only for women? (*Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* 94)

She further asks:

But whether it be Karna or Arjun, why do they take vows to remain far from women until they achieve their desired goal? Does the company of a woman suck out the strength of a man? Is this his lack of confidence in the strength of his character or is it

due to the fear of a woman's charismatic attraction? By keeping women far from his path of fulfilment does man give proof of his firmness or weakness? (ibid 305)

Questioning the moral interpretation of her fall on the last journey undertaken by her, Draupadi complains bitterly:

We carried no food, as was the custom when one embarked on *mahaprasthan*. We had no means to protect ourselves should the snow beasts happen to be real. (Yudhisthira had declared that weapons were a sign of ego and persuaded my other husbands to lay them down.) It was clear that we wouldn't last long enough to reach any peak, sacred or otherwise. That did not worry me too much. I had accepted that we would probably die on the mountain. But what I resented was this: when we fell, our failure would be ascribed not to a physical limitation but a moral one. (Divakaruni, 344-45)

Draupadi's morality was questioned after she fell first, with Yudhisthira informing Bhima that she loved Arjuna more than the others. Even the one who was loved more did not respond. The rules of primogeniture ensured that elder brother's words were their command. Draupadi questions Yudhisthira's calm demeanour when she is molested by Keechaka in Virata's court:

I cried out to Virat for justice, but he sat as though deaf. Only his head, bent helplessly, betrayed his shame. He knew that without Keechak's support he could not run his kingdom... But what hurt me worst was Yudhishtir's demeanour; he gazed at me, silent and calm as though I were enacting a play. (ibid 230)

Her real anger was against Arjuna, who ignored her:

I was uncomfortable, miserable, disillusioned—most of all, angry with Arjun. I'd expected him to be my champion. It was the least he could have done after plucking me from my home. (ibid 109)

Draupadi sought revenge against those who have insulted her:

I didn't expect such superstition from the foremost heroes of Bharat! Of course, there will be blood. Of course, there will be death. As kshatriyas, isn't that what you've trained for all your lives? And are you afraid now? (ibid 239)

This revenge was against the injustice done to women who had been 'othered' by history. While addressing Krishna Draupadi says:

Sakha, if those who were responsible for the horrifying outrage that Draupadi suffered in the Kuru court, for wicked misbehaviour, do not receive exemplary punishment, then the history of Bharata will be filled with shameful accounts of atrocities against women. (Ray 251)

To achieve this end, Draupadi stitched discontent onto her features and let her hair fall, matted and wrathful, around her face. Each day as she served their meals, she reminded the Pandavas of how they had failed her, and what she had suffered as a result in Duryodhan's sabha: "Each dawn when she arose, she pictured her revenge: a fire-strewn battlefield, the air grim with vultures, the mangled bodies of the Kauravas and their allies—the way she would transform history" (Divakaruni, 199) .

Draupadi was livid at Yudhishtira's opinion that they could be as comfortable in the forest as they were in their palace. She expresses her anger and pain in these words:

She's dead. Half of her died the day when everyone she had loved and counted on to save her sat without protest and watched her being shamed. The other half perished with her beloved home. But never fear. The woman who has taken her place will gouge a deeper mark into history than that naïve girl ever imagined. (ibid 206)

Draupadi says that she always thought herself better than her father, better than all those men who inflicted harm on a thousand innocents to punish the one man who had wronged them. She thought herself above the cravings that drove him. But she realised that she too, was tainted with them, vengeance encoded into her blood. When the moment came, she couldn't resist it,

no more than a dog can resist chewing a bone that, splintering, makes his mouth bleed (ibid 195). Divakaruni's Draupadi found herself questioning the process of being 'othered' by the hegemonic discourse. Unlike the Draupadi of the meta-narrative, who chose to keep quiet, conforming to the mould set for women by society, Divakaruni's protagonist seeks to dismantle it. The generational and societal shift is evident in the narrative, but the one thing that is common is the patriarchal omniscience which has defined the way a woman should behave.

### *Disembodied Voices and Phantom Listeners: Polyphony in the Frame Tales*

In his work on the grand epic, Brian Black explores the theme of female listeners in *The Mahabharata*, both in terms of how the text represents its projected audience and in terms of how the female characters claim authority to speak on matters of dharma and moksha (*Gender and Narrative in The Mahabharata*). He says that despite the text's orientation towards men, its focus on war, and the way it characterizes the ideals of heroism, honour and courage as specifically masculine traits, it has been accepted as the Veda for women and shudras, repackaging the teachings of the Vedas for a universal audience (ibid 53). Black attempts to look at how the dialogical presentation of the text gives us an indication of its projected audience, paying attention to the frame stories. He finds Draupadi hearing large portions of the text while at the sides of their husband kings – fulfilling her function as the queen. He acknowledges that Draupadi's listening is far from passive, as she has consequential speaking parts and is a major contributor to a number of pivotal episodes in the story (ibid).

Brian Black finds Draupadi being educated as the Dharma Queen through the frame tales, like the tale of Nala and Damyanti. He agrees with Hildebeitel who points out that Draupadi can recognize herself emotionally in Damayanti when she hears her wondering whether it is her "impoverished share" or "ill fortune" that makes her suffer' (*Rethinking the Mahābhārata* 219). Draupadi is given a portent regarding things to come through listening to

the stories of Nala and Damayanti, Rama and Sita, and Satyavan and Savitri. Black says that as with the Nala story, Draupadi is not specifically named as a listener to either the Rama or the Savitri tales, yet both imply her presence because they are introduced with particular connection to her: both are told after Draupadi has been retrieved by the Pandavas following her abduction by Jayadratha.

The Rama story is prompted by Yudhishtira's comments about the difficulties of life in exile and his inquiry as to whether anyone has suffered as much as he has (*The Mahabharata BORI* 3.257.9–10). It has a particular relevance to the life of Draupadi, because, like Sita, she accompanies her husband to the forest and is abducted. Black points out that the Rama story heard by Draupadi does not end in the same manner as Valmiki's poem, as Markandeya's version has husband and wife reunited at the end, serving as a message to Yudhishtira and Draupadi not to be despondent.

Brian Black highlights the fact that even the Savitri story has a parallel between Draupadi saving Yudhishtira and his brothers at the dicing match, and Savitri saving her husband from Yama in the tale he is about to hear. At the end of the story Markandeya indirectly addresses Draupadi as a listener by predicting that, like the heroine of his story, she will save her husbands in the future: "Thus Savitri by her toils saved them all – herself, her father and mother, her mother-in-law and father-in-law, and her husband's entire dynasty. Likewise, the well-augured Draupadi, esteemed for her character, shall rescue you all, just as the nobly-descended Savitri!" (*The Mahabharata BORI* 3.283.14–15)

Since the occasion for which Draupadi is most known for saving her husbands is the dicing match that had already happened when Draupadi hears the story of Savitri, Black guesses that perhaps Markandeya is referring to the Virata parvan where Draupadi overhears the arrogant Uttara boast about his martial skills, yet make the excuse that there is no charioteer fit to drive him to the battlefield (*The Mahabharata BORI* 4. 34.1–9). On Draupadi's suggestion

Uttara took help from Arjuna, disguised as Brihannala. Her intervention saves her husbands because Arjuna is called to the battlefield and is able to stave off the Kauravas until the Pandavas' year in hiding ends.

Angelika Malinar, in her work titled "Arguments of a Queen" (*Gender and Narrative* 79) finds Draupadi a strong and self-willed woman. She points out that the depiction of Draupadi in *The Mahabharata* as a self-confident and rhetorically skilled woman stands in contrast to the role usually accorded to females in the law books. While Jamison considers this pattern an 'almost accidental by-product of conflicting (male) religious goals' (*Sacrificed wife/sacrificer's wife* 15–16), Malinar proposes that in analysing this interdependence one needs to employ a relational notion of gender, since men and women are defined in relation to each other and in relation to the social role they must fulfil, as what is being dealt here is not a binary opposition based on fixed attributes or intrinsic, essential properties ascribed to each sex, but a hierarchical structure in which attributes depend on the relationships between the different actors, and this means that they can change according to context and situation (*Gender and Narrative* 90).

Malinar argues that the 'representational' quality of kingship was an important feature of the discourse between exiled Draupadi and Yudhishtira in the Aranyakaparvan. She says that the discourse was a negotiation of a crisis in their relationship, because Yudhishtira, in losing everything during the dice game, had lost his status. The question now was as to how could one be Yudhishtira's wife without being a queen, and, conversely, how could one be Draupadi's husband and not be a king, indicating that the situation both partners find themselves in does not at all facilitate the ideal relationship between a king and his queen because royal status had been lost and its representation had become a problem (*ibid*).

The question of the appropriate 'representation' of social status, especially royal status, says Malinar, is an important referential framework which determines the structure not only of

gender relationships, but also of gender related discourses about kingship. Draupadi's verbal attacks on Yudhishtira were directed at his being displaced from the social context of 'status representation' (*Gender and Narrative* 90). She is not willing to put up with a man who suffers degradation and defeat without fighting back and who, on top of everything, finds reasons to feel good about it. As Draupadi states, if it is only power and strength that count, then one should pity those who are powerless, so it is better to have power. In a masculinist ambience she is forced to yield to her husband's admonition. However, at the very end of her speech she manages to argue for self-assertion in the realm of politics and sovereignty.

While discussing gender and the construction of a dialogical self in *The Mahabharata*, Laurie L. Patton (2007), in his article 'How do you conduct yourself?', questions the viewing of 'woman' as a singular category, and speaks of multiple gender ideologies in the great epic (*Gender and Narrative* 98). He refers to the concept of 'the dialogical self' to show the ways in which gender is constructed not only through the binary roles of male and female, but also through a series of multiple roles within both male and female repertoires, making the dialogical, gendered self a multiple self, with a variety of momentary roles to choose from (ibid). Following the hermeneutic approach of the dialogical self in *The Mahabharata*, Patton has chosen two particular dialogues in which gender ideology plays a significant role (ibid). He has taken dialogues in which two women talk about gender roles, among many other topics, the dialogue of Draupadi and Satyabhama in the Aranyakaparvan (*The Mahabharata BORI* 3.222-4).

Patton agrees with Judith Butler who posits that identity is performative and discursive, particularly when it comes to gender (*Gender and Narrative* 98). He finds Butler insisting that the very idea of a 'culturally intelligible subject' is a result of rule-bound discourse, iterated throughout a series of performative instances which gives us an important insight into the nature of the epic (ibid). Patton points out that when queried by Satyabhama, Draupadi happily



speaks of servitude, of treating one's husband like a god – the classic pativrata devotion, serving her husbands without regard for her own likes and dislikes (ibid). Draupadi never bathes nor eats nor sleeps until her husband has; she renounces what he renounces, eats and drinks what he does, and so on (*The Mahabharata BORI* 3.222.23–4, 29–31). Later Draupadi declares that she never, in sleeping, eating, or talking, acts against the wishes of her Lord, and that she is always guided by her husbands (*The Mahabharata BORI* 3.222.35–6).

Patton finds some very intriguing ideas in this dialogue which would not be brought to light by such a reading: Draupadi's awareness of the basic power dynamics between men and women, as well as her sense of her own power and agency within a given situation (*Gender and Narrative* 100). Patton sees Draupadi constructing a dialogical self – a loosely connected set of voices in dialogical relation to each other. He says that Draupadi and Satyabhama are not just concerned with wifely behaviour per se, but the question of control and deceit – agency itself. When Satyabhama wonders about the practice of vows, or asceticism, or ablutions, or mantras, or herbs, or some special knowledge of roots, or recitation, or fire-sacrifice, or drugs, Draupadi replies (*The Mahabharata BORI* 3.222.9) that Satyabhama was asking her about conduct that was 'asat' – that does not have the quality of truth.

Draupadi says that her real power and agency was in overseeing the welfare of her husbands and the affairs of the state: "It was I who watched over the regulation and the number [of chores] among them, and I who listened to them" (*The Mahabharata BORI* 3.222.49). Draupadi goes on to note in verse 3.222.50 that she alone knew the activities of the maids and the cowherds. In verse 51, she makes an ultimate power statement: "I alone knew the incomes and expenses of the king's revenues". She alone supervised the treasury, which was inexhaustible like the hordes of Varuna. Such language of mastery (phrases such as *Ekaham vedmi*) is not the only language that indicates Draupadi's awareness of her own power (*Gender and Narrative* 103).

According to Patton, with this theoretical lens, the idea of a polyphonic ‘voice’ which builds a single character – we can read Draupadi’s speech in a new way: these are not simply the monochrome statements of a pativrata, but rather, various voices of Draupadi which alternate between fierceness and meekness, savvy and servitude, authority and submission (104). She is both the one who does not spend too much time in the privy, who does not laugh except at a jest (*The Mahabharata BORI* 3.222.25–30), and the one who guards her husbands, oversees crores of personnel, and alone knows the amounts in the treasury. Indeed, in the various roles she assumes, Patton considers Draupadi as the adi-superwoman. Draupadi takes on roles of strength and authority with clear knowledge of the particular power dynamics of a palace household, since being a pativrata is a two-way street, says Patton (*Gender and Narrative* 104). In his view the theorists of ‘the dialogical self,’ such as Hermans and Kempen, had exactly this in mind as to what the construction of a dialogical self might look like. In Draupadi, Patton finds a polyphonic voice and a set of multifaceted roles which make it impossible to think of a single woman’s voice embracing a single gender ideology. He finds *The Mahabharata* not speaking with a single voice when it comes to ‘women’ or even ‘gender ideology’, with Draupadi’s speech lending support to Butler’s idea of gender as performative. So, when Satyabhama asks about instruments to make husbands obedient, Draupadi answers by narrating a series of acts. Thus, by answering in this way, Draupadi emerges as a ‘culturally intelligible subject’ within a rule-bound discourse – a discourse which is polyphonic in nature, observes Patton (*Gender and Narrative* 104).

### *Feminist Theodicy: Draupadi as Tiraupatyamma, the Patron Deity of the Fire-Walking Cult*

In keeping with the fluidity of the oral tradition and the resilience of the feminist theodicy in the Indic myths, we find a distinct Draupadi tradition in place in the southern states of India. In his path breaking work on *The Mahabharata* folk and cult tradition, Hildebeital

(1988) reveals Draupadi as the goddess who, far away from the patriarchal traditions of the Aryavarta, had gained an independent standing and position of her own. His work on the persona of Draupadi as a south Indian cult goddess traces her emergence as a folk deity in the south Indian states. A patriarchal construct in the magnum opus of Vyasa, Draupadi evolves from a Kshatriya queen who is expected to carry on the hyper-masculine agenda of the phallogocentric text, to the cult deity with an independent standing and position. The myths and rituals of the Draupadi cult give her centre-stage as the patron deity of the region and not just as the consort of the Pandavas, reflecting what Hildebeital says:

You are the Primal Sakti, Mother Draupadi, who came and rose from fire, O mother!  
Mother Sakti, Mother Draupadi, O mother, you who rose, rushing forth from the sacrificial fire of Panchala. Not touchable, mother, you are the fire, mother... O mother, lady who is there in the universe great and small... If one sees you in the daytime, you are Parvati. In the night-time, you have become the stars. (*The Cult of Draupadi* 11)

In his work titled “*When the Goddess Was a Woman*”, Hildebeitel (2011) presents his findings from the fieldwork based on the cult of Draupadi, where he discusses the transition that the character of Draupadi has undergone. The symbolism as portrayed in the myths, rituals and dramatizations amply bear witness to the figure of authority that Draupadi has become, inverting the patriarchal epic and bringing out the matrifocal ambience to the advantage of the ‘other’. Adluri quotes Hildebeital:

One of the epic’s primary foci is the question of who Draupadī is as a figure - a rebel, a figure who is independent, vigorous, challenging, a principled woman, a very different kind of woman, intellectually shrewd, on top of things to the extent it is possible to be on top of such things. (*When the Goddess was a woman* xxvi)

In this volume Hildebeital utilizes both ethnographic and textual findings, concentrating on the folk and the regional *Mahabharatas*. In his article on “*Colonialist Lenses on the South*

*Indian Draupadī Cult* (1992),” Hildebeitel draws our attention to the sheer neglect of the southern folk tradition of *The Mahabharata* by the colonial writers. While examining the regional version of the Tamil Mahabharata as documented and practiced by the Shudra peasants called Vanniyars in Tamil Nadu, he focuses on the analysis of war and sacrifice as “genera of becoming” with the intent of providing a soteriological response to the problem of becoming (*Colonialist Lenses* 507).

In his “*Tales of Women's Suffering: Draupadi and other Amman Goddesses as Role Models for Women*”, Alleyn Diesel (2002), draws our attention to the Draupadi worship in KwaZulu-Natal by the original Hindu immigrants. He speaks of the native south Indian Amman religion, dominated by female deities (*Tales of Women's Suffering* 9). Diesel portrays the Amman goddesses led by Draupadi as patrons of women who have been marginalized by men. These are not subdued females bound by the diktats of patriarchy. They subvert and empower, offering an alternative to the phallogocentric world view (ibid 10). The feminist theodicy is evident in the rise of Draupadi as the patron deity of the Fire-walking cult.

### *Draupadi as Kali, the Goddess of Death*

Draupadi, also called Krishnaa, the dark one, reminds one of Kali, the dark goddess of destruction. Hildebeitel has drawn comparisons between Draupadi and Kali, the Goddess of death. Like Kali, Draupadi led the Kauravas to their inevitable death, to restore the balance of Dharma in the world. The image of Kali in the battle-field – her hair open, her tongue dripping blood, her strides challenging the opponents find a resonance in the open hair of Draupadi and the enduring legend of her vow of tying her hair only after anointing it with Duhshasana’s blood. Though the Critical Edition is silent about this pledge, there is enough subsequent reference to the act which prompted the great war of the Bharatas. Bhaṭṭa Narayaṇa, in his eighth century classic “*Veṅṅisaṃhara (The Binding-Up of the Braid)*” and Subramanya Bharati in “*Panchali Sabadham, (The Vow of Panchali)*” reiterate the myth. Hildebeitel points out: “It

is found in the Tamil rendition of the Mahābhārata by Villiputtūr Ālvār (ca. 1400), in the Kannada version of Kumāra Vyāsa (fifteenth century), in the Malayalam renditions of the story by the sixteenth century Ezhuthachan and others, and in the dramatic styles of the kathakali from Kerala, the yakṣagāna of Karnataka, and terukkūttu of Tamilnadu (*When the Goddess was a woman* 3).” He draws our attention to the background myths for the cult of the goddess Draupadī (Tamil: Tiraupatyammaṅ). In her enduring identity as ‘Tiraupatyammaṅ’, the popular cult Goddess of the marginal, Draupadi transcends the gendered ventriloquism of an essentially male preserve and renegotiates the margin. Bhima’s death threat to Duhshasana echoes the blood for blood cry:

नृशंसं परुषं क्रूरं शक्यं दुःशासन त्वया | निकृत्या हि धनं लब्ध्वा को विकत्थितुमर्हति ||२०||

मा ह स्म सुकृताँल्लोकान्गच्छेत्पार्थो वृकोदरः | यदि वक्षसि भित्त्वा ते न पिबेच्छेणितं रणे ||२१||

धार्तराष्ट्राण्णे हत्वा मिषतां सर्वधन्विनाम् | शमं गन्तास्मि नचिरात्सत्यमेतद्ब्रवीमि वः ||२२||

*The Mahabharata BORI 2:68: 21-22*

I tell thee that if Vrikodara, the son of Pritha, drinketh not thy life-blood, piercing open thy breast in battle, let him not attain to regions of blessedness, I tell thee truly that by slaying the sons of Dhritarashtra in battle, before the very eyes of all the warriors, I shall pacify this wrath of mine soon enough (*The Mahabharata*, translated by K. M. Ganguli, Sabha Parva, Section LXXVIII). The same trope is repeated when Bhima bays for Duryodhana’s blood: “Let not Vrikodara attain to the regions, obtained by his ancestors, if he doth not break that thigh of thine in the great conflict” (ibid Section LXXI).

The helpless, distressed Draupadi who was bailed out by Lord Krishna, is a far cry from the ‘millennial Draupadis’, as Hildebeital conclusively proves in his scholarly work (*The Cult of Draupadi* 293). Draupadi as virgin Vira Shakti or Kali, the primal, uncontrolled, wild power of ‘Prakriti’ (ibid 291), has a significant presence in the southern states of India. Draupadi’s

sons were not her biological sons but were born of drops of blood when, in her Kali form, Draupadi's nails pierced Bhima's hand (ibid 293). Pradip Bhattacharya says that like Helen, Draupadi seemed to attract strife and cause bloodshed, and like Demeter- nemesis and Persephone, who aroused both admiration and fear, Draupadi was Krishna, the dark goddess' (*Panchakanya* 45). He draws our attention to the fact that Draupadi is not known for her motherly attributes. She did not raise her sons, sending them to the Panchala Kingdom when she joined her husbands in exile. Her focus during the entire 12 years of exile (Vanawasa) and one year of living incognito (Agyatavasa) was revenge, to somehow keep the wound festering. We don't find her lamenting the leaving behind of her sons, who are shadowy images in the epic (ibid 46).

The dark, dishevelled hair of goddess Mahakali, and the blood-anointed, open hair of Draupadi have a sense of similarity. Bhatta Narayana's *The Venisamhara* is a 7<sup>th</sup> century dramatization of the focal act of epic – the dragging down of Draupadi by her hair. Bhima, the second -born of Kunti and the hero of this Drama, is incensed at the sight of his Queen being abused and humiliated and resolves to tie Draupadi's hair only after anointing it with the blood of Duhshasana, "Uttansayishyati Kachanstawa Devi Bhimah" (*The Venisamhara*)! Draupadi's hair acts as the signifier, i.e. of a woman's respect and the Pandava honour, as also of subversion on the part of Draupadi who keeps the fire of revenge alive. The *Venisamhara* shows Draupadi as a determined Kshatriya Queen for whom honour was more important than death. She informs an incensed Bhima that she is ecstatic at his anger: "My Lord, my anger rises when you are indifferent, not when you are enraged."

Draupadi in the epic may have compromised with her situation, but Bhatta Narayana's Draupadi blazes till she has avenged her insult. At the end of the play when a dejected Yudhisthira laments the death of his kin and asks Bhima, "Kimparamavashistam? (Is there

anything else left?)”, Bhima informs him that the major task of tying Draupadi’s hair after anointing it with the blood of Duhshasana remains. He says:

“Sanyachhami tavadnena Suyodhanashonitokshiten Panina Panchalya Duhshasanavakrishtam keshahastam” - “I shall just tie up Panchali’s mass of hair, which was formerly pulled by Duhshasana, with this hand of mine which is wet with Suyodhana’s blood.” (*The Venisamhara* 194)

The gods from the heavens descend to watch the tying of Draupadi’s hair by Bhima, as it symbolized the culmination of the great war between good and evil.

### *Draupadi: The Survivor*

The Draupadi that emerges out of the mono-dimensionality of the male-engendered language makes a place for herself as a survivor. She regains her voice through the re-tellings, appropriates the right to express her thoughts, and fearlessly questions her marginality. As Divakaruni’s Draupadi she re-evaluates the war and casts doubt on the epic representation of a simplistic binary division of the Pandavas as all-good and the Kauravas as all-evil. She condemns the exploitation of the sentiments of Eklavya by Drona and the resultant abuse:

For Arjuna the incident proved how much his teacher loved him. But I, thinking of the forever-lost talent of Eklavya as I looked down at Kurukshetra, wondered if it didn’t demonstrate Drona’s ruthlessness, his readiness to do anything to win. What shape would that ruthlessness take over the next few days? (*The Palace of Illusions* 286)

Divakaruni’s Draupadi castigates the Pandavas for the incidents where they had strayed from the path of truth, as in the case of Jayadratha, where Krishna had created the illusion of a fake sunset to make him believe that the day’s battle had been done, or of Drona, who was deceived into believing that Ashwatthama, his son, was killed. Drona lay down his arms and was mowed down by Dhrishtadyumna, Draupadi’s twin, finally fulfilling the purpose of their existence (ibid 291).

Draupadi in the meta-narrative had kept quiet, believing it to be man's world run by his laws, but the millennial Draupadi condemns the mindless bloodshed and the digression from Dharma. Speaking about her own brother Dhrishtadyumna who was jubilant after killing Drona, she says, "His laughter was so like that of the men who had killed Abhimanyu that had I not been watching, I couldn't have told them apart (ibid 292). This Draupadi condemned Yudhishtira who wants to forgive Jayadratha since he was kin. She says:

You are perhaps even more forgiving than the best of all men of honour, Ram. For the crime of abducting Sita, Ram killed a wise man like Ravan. But because he is your brother-in-law, you will not punish him? Your wife being insulted does not pain you or excite you! The scriptures say that if the abductor of a woman or usurper of a kingdom should seek sanctuary, it will be unjust to let him live. He is the chief enemy of society. (*Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* 321)

Draupadi is convinced that in a man's world, right and wrong are decided upon which side of the power equation are you: "Right. Wrong. Only words. You can use them any way you want. Or it seems to me. But while I could not accept what these words said, my father did. I knew it then, that men and women speak different languages" (Deshpande, *Writing from the Margin* 242).

While Deshpande's Draupadi questions the double standards of the society, Ray's *Yajnaseni* contends that calling man and woman equal for the sake of argument did not settle the issue completely:

Like her body, a woman's mind, too, is different from that of a man. Therefore, from age to age society has made different rules for it. If a man takes several wives, then the wives keep trying to win his heart. He may, according to his desire, choose his favourite and be attracted more to her. But what if a woman takes many husbands? Then, taking note of the likes and dislikes of all the husbands, she has to win the hearts of all.



Otherwise, life becomes difficult. (Ray 98)

The millennial Draupadi does not agree with the remarks of her brother's tutor who maintains that virtuous women are reborn as men in their next births. She would prefer women to be sent to a place where men are prohibited to enter so that they can rest in peace and be free of the demands imposed by men (*The Palace of Illusions* 155). This Draupadi feels that she has been othered by a language that was made by men, and thus served them:

I knew that words and ideas cannot mean the same to us as they mean to men, because the meanings of words have been built around the interests of men. Women, we need to remember, have not participated in the process of word-making. (*Writing from the Margin* 95)

She further asks:

Language is undoubtedly a problem for all women, for the words have been created by men for their feelings, their ideas about sex. And these words are not really right for women. A woman writer will at least try to find some words; most women just don't have them. (ibid 193)

The Draupadi who arises out of the writings by women stakes her claim on unfamiliar territory. By finding her voice she takes up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus. Hélène Cixous (1976) says that the symbolic order of the phallus has marginalised women who must protest by writing for women. Women must confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. She exhorts women to break out of the snare of silence and cautions them against accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem (*The Laugh of the Medusa* 881). This new Draupadi is a creation of a form of writing that is geared more towards the body than the reason, called as feminine writing by Cixous, who suggests that writing can be either masculine or feminine, irrespective of the sexual identity of its author, because notions of both masculinity

and femininity are socially engendered: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth”, says Cixous (880). Draupadi’s body as a site of exchange is inscribed by patriarchal abuse, and the re-tellings based on *the Mahabharata* question this transaction.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1998) observes that the epic poets the world over were men singing the glory of other men—armed men, to be precise. She points out that of the thirty-eight basic things upon which most epic narratives of the world were based, only nine were associated with women. The ideals of the epic world did not have much to share with women. There was little they could do there, other than get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other (*When Women Retell* 18). The Draupadi of the re-tellings broke this mould and stepped out, exploding the myth of essence, or, as Dani Cavallaro posits, arguing that all identities were textual and that, like all texts, they were inevitably riddled by internal tensions and paradoxes (*French Feminist Theory* 120). Unlike the Draupadi in the epic, who was caught in the ‘male web of reason, order and symbols’, an ‘other’ in herself, the new Draupadi is a product of *écriture féminine* which is semiotic in nature. She resembles a woman who, Irigaray in a different context has “said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious...not to mention her language, in which she sets off in all directions leaving "him" unable to discern the coherence of any meaning” (*This Sex Which is Not One* 28-29). Irigaray points out: “Her’s are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand” (ibid). To read the persona of Draupadi one must give up on the laid-out grid and think afresh, as has been attempted by the re-tellings.

Draupadi’s body turns into the body- politic and the site of contest as Kevin Mcgarth (2011) indicates in his work *‘Strī: Feminine Power in the Mahābhārata’*: ‘As the burgeoning conflict between rival sides of a family focuses on the subjection of Draupadi’s body, she

supplies this primary terrain or field for the clash of cousins as they struggle for power and sovereignty. The narrative concentrates on and circulates about her person as she represents the core of the epic, the point from which all subsequent dramatic perspective emanates' (124). In her work titled '*Volatile Bodies: Towards A Corporeal Feminism*', Elizabeth Grosz (1994) regrets that as a discipline, philosophy has surreptitiously excluded femininity, and ultimately women, from its practices through its usually implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body. She maintains that philosophy as we know it has established itself as a form of knowing, a form of rationality, only through the disavowal of the body, and the corresponding elevation of mind as a disembodied term (ibid 4). Grosz questions the construction and representation of female bodies as frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable, subject to various intrusions which are not under conscious control which ascribe women a position of inferiority (ibid 5). She strongly disagrees with the engagement of the logic of essentialism and aligning women with corporeality.

Partocinio. P. Schweickart (1997) finds gender and politics being suppressed in the dominant models of reading. According to him the feminist story speaks of the difference between men and women, of the way the experience and perspective of women have been systematically assimilated into the generic masculine, and of the need to correct this error (*Reading Ourselves* 616). In the militaristic masculine version of the epic, we do not see Draupadi objecting to the unique arrangement that comes up when the Pandavas take her home. They had to honour their mother's injunctions regarding sharing the day's alms, which was aided by the fact that each one of them was enamoured by the ethereal beauty of Draupadi. The political consideration of keeping the sibling rivalry at bay and the Pandavas united for the restoration of their kingdom was also kept in mind. Draupadi's needs and desires were nobody's concern.

Foucault finds the ideas of the 'feminine' being the result of the interplay of previous historical understandings of femininity and the bodies these have produced (Bartky 1988; Bordo 1988). Bordo, while discussing Foucault says that sexuality and sex are the axes along and through which bodies are theorised, since bodies are understood in relation to the production, transmission, reception and legitimation of knowledge about sexuality and sex. She says that Foucault's work is of value for feminists because it disrupts, through its refusal of the notions of transhistorical and stable categories of sexuality/ sex, any analyses of the cultural relationships between women, bodies and sexuality based on the limitations of traditional understandings.

Bordo says that women have been identified in western culture as sexualised bodies, and Foucault's suggestions about the new form of power, bio-power, or the disciplining of bodies and populations, have strong resonances with feminist theories (*Psychopathology as the crystallization of culture* 89). Bodies are produced, understood, deployed in the service of certain interests and relationships of power, says Jana Sawicki (*Feminism and Foucault*, 1988:186–90). Draupadi's body was one such site of power, exploitation and resistance. Sawicki posits that bodies are a battleground of interests and power, something feminists have long understood, and it is in helping to define the foci of these battles, that Foucault is of most service to feminist projects. Foucault asserts that there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable; others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.

Though Foucault's analysis of power undermines previous feminist understandings of patriarchy as a monolithic power structure, it does not deny the possibility of understanding gender relations as serving specific, interlocking interests. The collapse of the concept of

‘patriarchy’ frees feminists to pursue specific, local struggles without justifying these with reference to an entirely male system of power and consequent oppositional female powerlessness. Foucault seeks to displace the focus of these other, accepted histories by offering differing, historical, marginalised perspectives (*The History of Sexuality* 96). Draupadi’s resistance is not just against the masculinist social relations, but also against the forces that align to it or succumb and then cooperate with it.

Kate Millett points out that the evidence from anthropology, religion and literary myth all attest to the politically expedient character of patriarchal convictions about women (*Sexual Politics* 46). Yet, a dark-skinned girl called Krishnaa Draupadi changed the course of the grand narrative, *The Mahabharata*. Denied formal education, she eavesdropped on the education of her brother Dhrishtadyumna, the chosen one, equipping herself with enough knowledge to be called a ‘Pandita’ (scholar). Taking over the mantle from Kunti, she restored the Pandavas to prosperity. Her grit and determination made her the most captivating presence in the epic.

As Draupadi steps out of Vyasa’s textual universe, she finds herself in a different matrix of power, fuelled by women-centric narratives. Her voice resonates in the oral transmissions across the country, whether it is in ‘Yakshagana’ in Karnataka, or ‘Pandavani’ in Madhya Pradesh, or regional variations elsewhere. Her move from the periphery to the centre is obvious in the various re-tellings considered in this analysis. From being an evident patriarchal construct in the meta-narrative, she emerges as a vocal champion of her rights. She comes across as someone who has choices, and where none exist, she creates one. Draupadi, the articulate, daring woman of strength and substance who had been silenced in the dominant discourse, rises like a phoenix in the re-tellings.

“I thought of the prophecy then, with yearning and fear. I wanted it to be true. But did I have the makings of a heroine—courage, perseverance, an unbending will? And shut up as I was inside this mausoleum of a palace, how could history even find me?”, says Draupadi (*The*

*Palace of Illusions* 5). A focused study of the re-tellings demonstrates that she has indeed burst through the mausoleum of traditional interpretations and forced history to find her. Despite being a gendered subaltern in a phallogocentric milieu, she has managed to emerge a survivor. Her journey from submission to subversion, and the trajectory of her empowerment from a gendered perspective has made Draupadi the mascot of feminist assertion.



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