

Draupadi: Contrasting Stereotypical Idealism and Gendering

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Abstract

Stories are an integral life and breath of any human society. While some stories may have a regional appeal, some may hold sway at certain periods of time, there are few that over-ride the barriers of time and place. Such rare pieces of literature tend to act as soft power on the minds of its audience. Stories have been used for didactic purposes and to shape any society's notion of ideal especially with respect to women. Any character embodying such social ideals reinforce gender roles and may ultimately lead to gender stereotyping. Ancient Indian characters like Sita and Savitri exemplify the same. This paper discusses subversions of such social constructs of 'ideal women' in the Indian society by studying at length the character of Draupadi from the Mahabharata. This paper is an exploration of how characterization diversified from the notional ideal can act as a tool of empowerment.

Key words: Draupadi, gender role, gender stereotype, gender ideal and soft power

Introduction:

Stories act as tools of soft power due to the conscious narrative setting that they enable. They have been known to have deep impact of people's psyche. (Hillenbrand and Verrina). World over one can see how literature and particularly characterization in literary works has built certain images and stereotypes. These stereotypes are a combination of cultural thought and its literary manifestation. Social groups across civilizations may have found a tinted representation through literature of its time. Such representation tends to get stereotypical over time especially if that story or narrative has remained continuously a part of mass culture. (Cauthen, E. and H.) Feminist literary criticism brought to forefront such stereotyping of female characters that were

replete in literature by studying gender roles. While the lense of gender-oriented study in the academia came in colonial periods to India, one can see its use to study female characters in Indian literature as a post-colonial phenomenon. A study of the portrayal of female characters in Indian literature especially is an interesting exercise due to multiple reasons. India though rich in diversity has a common cultural milieu that has spanned over centuries. While each state and region have its own stories, the two most popular Indian tales are those of its ancient epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The two epics have reached their audiences through various aural and visual media since ancient times and it continues till date. These stories have broken barriers of geography, religion and race and are hence a source of mass didactic discourse. The lessons

ingrained in these stories have reached people in forms of abstract philosophy, moralistic discourse and behavioral norms for disparate races, genders and castes. Feminist criticism did ultimately reach even these narratives and one can cite multiple instances of gender stereotyping upon taking a closer look at some of the post popular characters such as Sita, Ahalya, Savitri, Shakuntala, etc. the stories of these women have been peddled as lessons of either the benefits or pitfalls of behaviour which breaks the molds of social ideals. While this sense of ideal behaviour for women has changed over time, its basic percepts and interpretations have remained fairly constant. With notable exceptions such as Devi Puran, certain post-colonial retellings of these stories by female authors and feminine perspectives; the template of morality has remained fairly constant. The universality in what it means to be an ideal woman is interesting. Simone De Beauvoir in her most acknowledged work the Second Sex states that ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ (Beauvoir), she explains at length how socially defined gender roles are imbibed on to various genders so that they achieve the social ‘ideal’ of that the particular gender. On similar lines, we can find ‘ideal women’ defined in Indian literature right from ancient times; it is essential to note that ‘idealism’ in the woman is defined primarily with respect to her role as a wife. Here is a translation of a famous Sanskrit shloka that outlines above mentioned idealism, “the one who works dutifully like a servant, is a wise advisor, feeds like a mother, is a temptress like Rambha (a celestial dancer) in bed, looks like Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) incarnate, is forgiving like earth such a well-behaved woman makes an ideal wife.” (Sree). Most

Indian mythological characters that have been revered by masses such as Sita, Savitri etc. have themselves become an example and hence stereotype of idealism. Though subsequent female characters in Indian literature especially the ones written in post-colonial era do subvert and at times break this mould, the original in this regard will surely be Draupadi. The paper shall explore at length how Draupadi stands apart in characterization from not only her peers but most females characterizations and narratives since. This paper shall explore her uniqueness with respect to the shloka mentioned above and various notions of the feminine ideal.

Objectives of the Study:

- To study gender roles and their use to define the ‘feminine ideal’.
- To analyze how certain characterizations of from ancient Indian literature have subverted such definitions of ideal and thereby of gender identity

Research Design:

Systematic Research design has been used for the purpose of this study. The critical edition of Mahabharata translated by Mr. Bibek Debroy has been chosen as primary data source for in-depth analysis. Content Analysis of textual materials has been conducted using the theoretical frameworks of Gender studies with special emphasis on formation of gender stereotypes and gender ideals by studying gender roles.

Draupadi and femininity redefined:

Draupadi is one of the most famous characters in Indian literature since the ancient times. She is the heroine of the Vyasan epic Mahabharata. Draupadi and especially her life and choices are not a-

stereotypical only by today's social standards but she was a deviant even in the times in which she was written and portrayed. One of the beauties of her characterizations is that despite her presence in oral and written literature over the past 5000 years, she has continuously remained a bold, challenging and difficult to assimilate as personality for every time period in the Indian society. Draupadi though most well-known and well recognized character is not the only female character in Mahabharata who subverts gender stereotypes. We can see Kunti, Satyawati and to an extent Gandhari also do the same. However, Draupadi still manages to stand out because she is an odd combination of conformism and rebellion that remains unmatched in Indian literature even today. Firstly, unlike most female characters, Draupadi quite like Athena or Minerva, sprung fully formed from divine fire. One does not see any mentions of her childhood in the epic, nor are they referred to in any other context. While modern retellings of the Mahabharata do attempt to sketch her childhood, there is no mention of the same in the epic. This means that Draupadi was born with a 'sanskaras' of idealism. However, who gave her these sanskaras remains unclear. As she sprung from the sacred fire, one assumes she got this education from the Gods themselves or that she was intrinsically born with this knowledge. This could indicate that any and all behaviours of Draupadi that follow can easily be considered the ultimate ideal. This instantly brings forth new possibilities and helps redefine gender roles because Draupadi has throughout the epic made choices that are shocking even to ones with the most modern and progressive sensibilities.

Draupadi shortly after her 'birth' is expected to choose a groom from among the men who manage to win the challenge that her father has set. Arjuna disguised as a brahmana wins the challenge. However, Draupadi marries all 5 pandavas. Though it was common for a man to have many wives, it was and is still quite uncommon for women to have multiple husbands or partners and for that to be accepted by society. After Arjuna won her hand in the swayamvara and returned home, due to his mother's utterance that any bhiksha the brothers have brought should be shared by all meant that she was to be a wife to all of them. Her father and brother were opposed to this idea and offered her a way out by saying that she may reject such a proposal because it was vile by any social standard. However, upon knowing the rationale for why such a fate was hers from Ved Vyasa and Narada Muni, Draupadi chose to be a wife to all five of them. This element of the luxury of choice and the nature of choice itself make her unique.

Draupadi vastra haran is the most famed episode and enjoys rich imagery and iconography till date. Interestingly the question still remains whether any form of disrobing actually happened. The Mahabharata mentions Draupadi being dragged into the royal assembly by Dushshasan when she was menstruating. After this incidence several accounts refer to Draupadi being dragged by her hair in the royal assembly but none of an attempt at disrobing as it is pupolarly shown. In the Anukramanika section of the Aadi parva where Dhritarashtra makes a summary of all the events to Sanjaya, there too he only mentions the 'rajaswala' (menstruating) Draupadi being dragged by her hair. The whole episode of disrobing seems to be a

later interpolation, possibly post Bhagwat Purana. Another theory suggests that donning 'upavastra' a piece clothing something like a modern day 'chunari' or shawl for women and men was a sign of people who were not slaves. Slaves were not allowed to wear an upavastra and once Draupadi was believed to have become a slave of Dhartarashtras after the game of dice; she was hence not meant to wear an upavastra anymore. (Mehendale). Dusshasana is hence asked to pull it away. Here the imagery of 'disrobing' takes a back seat to the notion of slavery. Draupadi however stands out yet again by being the only one from the Pandavas side to challenge Yudhishtir's actions by posing the question "did you stake yourself or me first?". Despite being molested in an open court in front of and by members of family, Draupadi remains sane enough to make rational arguments and fight her way out of this situation with cold logic. She not only frees herself but also frees her husbands. Karna expresses his wonder; that a woman frees five valorous men from slavery, taint and shame. After Draupadi poses her question to Yudhishtir and his refusal to reply there are three reactions. Vikarna clearly on Draupadi's side declares that she is their sister-in-law and not a slave. Bhishma refuses to answer and states that it's something that confuses him as 'dharma' is subtle and then comes Karna's point of view that though a 'daas' (slave) owns no property of his own a wife is always the husband's property and hence he can pledge it. Here Draupadi argues that assuming that everything that a slave owns is anyway at disposal of his master, why did Yudhishtir need to separately pledge her after becoming a slave himself? As his and the other brothers' wife, Draupadi should have become the slave of their masters

automatically. The fact that she needed to be pledged separately by the slave Yudhishtir and that the royal assembly feels the need to de-nettle this unique issue itself asserts her freedom as an individual. The belief that a woman is a lower cadre to men in social and familial hierarchy and hence should be 'protected and rescued' by the men is prevalent even today; so is the belief that a woman is inherently weak and hence incapable of defending herself leave alone rescuing her husband. Though we see Savitri also rescues her husband, she rescues him from an abstract called death not from a complex social man-made disaster. Draupadi displays in assembly of men a cool, logical lawyerly display of argument though she herself is a victim. A subversion of notion of protection, rescue, strength and logical argumentation with reference to women can be seen here.

Just as 'wife' is a much-discussed ideal in all societies so is that of a mother. The ideal mother is the one who takes good care of her children, protects them and is always present for them. While a wife is not usually seen as a protector, a mother's role as a protector is deified. Draupadi breaks the mould yet again. She is surely a committed mother but chooses to stay away from her children for the 14 years of Vanavasa by leaving them in care of Arjuna's other wife Subhadra and that of her own father and brother. The Mahabharata's critical edition mentions that to go into vanavasa for 13 years and 1 year incognito period (adnyatvaas) was a must for the pandava brothers but not a compulsion for Draupadi. She could have chosen to stay back with her sons while her husbands were in the Vanavasa as we see the other Pandava wives do. However, Draupadi chooses to be in Vanavasa with her husbands so as to

ensure that they remember their ultimate aim which is to regain the kingdom and punish their cousins who have caused great harm to them over years and avenge her insult in the royal assembly. While one can see this as a mother's way of safeguarding her sons' future in the long term, she surely gives it more importance than the immediate necessity of being available to protect and raise them.

While Draupadi's characterization has in most places broken the stereotypical mould, she has been shown to be surprisingly conforming to this ideal in several places. During Yudhishtira's Rajasuya sacrifice, Draupadi despite being a Samradhni did not consume a single meal until every member of the family and guest and visitor was fed. This standard of an ideal hostess is met by Draupadi. This observation regarding her has been made by Duryodhana. (Vedvyaas) On the night that Draupadi was won by Arjuna; despite being a princess, she slept on the floor at her husbands' and mother-in-law's feet. In the Vanaparva, one can read a dialogue between Satyabhama (Krishna's wife) and Draupadi in which she describes how she manages to keep all Pandava brothers happy. Surprisingly Draupadi's explanation is very close to the shloka mentioned earlier in the paper "the one who works dutifully like a servant, is a wise advisor, feeds like a mother, is a temptress like Rambha (a celestial dancer) in bed, looks like Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) incarnate, is forgiving like earth such a well-behaved woman makes an ideal wife.". Draupadi states how she wakes before her husbands and sleeps once everyone has slept, how she nurtures them and ensures that they are well-fed and taken care of. She states how she always ensures that each guest is honoured and thereby

adds glory to the name and fame of her husbands for their matchless hospitality. She also mentions how she does not speak to them in loud or harsh manner and shows due respect to them and their mother. She claims to have always given good advice to her husbands and to have kept a minute track of all financial transactions they undertook as a family as well as for the kingdom when they ruled in Indraprastha. (VedVyaas)

This insight gives the researcher an understanding that Draupadi was intelligent enough to know that rebellion of social conventions cannot be a norm. One has to rebel when required but one cannot deride every social convention all the time. There as to be a give and take and one must conform in times of peace, softly subvert the wrong and unpleasant in day-to-day life and take an aggressive stand only when the situation is in critical or unusual. Unfortunately, the later retellings of the Mahabharata or of Draupadi focused mostly on her explosive rebellion than on this quiet wisdom she lives which is required for all persons at all times.

Conclusion

Draupadi's character and her choices, challenges and the reactions that they illicit are something most 21th century women can understand and admire. Draupadi could be unreadable, a mere fictitious character for women who were only acquainted with stories of gendered ideals like Sita and Savitri but deification and equal access to characters such as Draupadi, Kunti or Satyavati present options and variations to the definitions of female ideal. Draupadi in that sense is the herald of a new yuga, a more balanced definition of what it means to be a woman. She is vocal, very elemental

and restless as is the dominant woman spirit; similar in nature to the fire from which she is born while also being able to balance her emotional and logical side, an explosive and compliant side and above all

always displaying qualities of a person who holds their own and is governed by choices rather than compulsions in every phase and situation that life presents.

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