

ISSN 09776-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)
UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Polar Identities: An Exploration of the Multiple Myths of Draupadi

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Article History: Submitted-31/07/2017, Revised-04/09/2017, Accepted-05/09/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

The character of Draupadi from the *Mahabharata* has achieved cult status. One of the reasons for this is the multiple cultural identities of Draupadi concocted by the folktales of different cultures. The present study attempts to explore and analyse some of the major and long surviving myths to discover a different identity of Draupadi which is equally accepted and fits into the superstructure of the epic without seeming out of place. The study will also attempt to analyse the reason behind the creation of this myths.

Keywords: myth, unconsciousness, Terukuttu, virginity, polarity, violence, culture, archetype

Over the years, many characters in the *Mahabharata* have assumed larger-than-life statuses with innumerable interpolations adding to the expanse of the characters. The interpolations are hardly random and serve the purpose of connecting the character to the civilization, Percy Cohen in his essay *Theories of Myth* writes about the function of symbols in mythology,

...establishing different connections between the different functions performed by the same item of culture. (337)

Hence the character, in this case Draupadi, is not attributed a separate identity. The folk stories that are spun around the character are rent with plethora of symbols that signify the impact that character has on the general psyche of the population. An analysis of these symbols helps the researcher to understand why the character continues to fascinate audiences years after its conception.

For the present study we will be analysing the myth and symbols around Draupadi. There are very few characters in the Indian mythology that are more intriguing than the Pandava queen Draupadi. Her character is complex and fluid. She is a strong woman; she is also compassionate and sensitive. Intelligent and fiery, in the *Mahabharata*, which was based in a time when the gender roles were fixed, she manages to shine through by her sheer tenacity and grace. Why does she stand out? Is it for her beauty? Yes, she certainly is the most beautiful woman in the epic, but it is not just her beauty that makes her different, as Vyas points out:

She is not too short, nor is she too large; nor is she too dark nor is her complexion red.' She has eyes reddened from passion... whose eyes and fragrance are like autumnal lotuses. Attached to modesty, she is, in beauty, equal to Sri, the goddess of beauty. Were a man to desire a woman, she would be like this one, on account of her kindness; she would be like this one, on account of her beautiful figure; she would be like this one, on account of her perfect character. She is the last to sleep and first to awaken. She knows everything, down to the jobs both completed and not yet done by the cowherds and shepherds. Like the jasmine flower, the mallika, is she; with her perspiring face she appears similar to a lotus. She has red eyes, long hair, and a waist as slender as the sacrificial altar. (Book 1, 181)

The interpolations are an unavoidable part of the epic, however, we will take into consideration the recurring myths which find roots in the epic which surround Draupadi and which are in some way are related to either the Northern or Southern version of the epic, and not the ones that have gone on a tangent of their own.

Draupadi, as Vyas points out was born as “an embodiment of Shri” and over the ages she, more than any other female characters in the epic has been compared to several important and powerful goddess.

The Terukuttu plays, a Tamil street theatre form practised in Tamil Nadu, celebrates Draupadi as a goddess calls her *virasakti* (heroic power) who went into the forest to help the Pandavas,

“For the Pandavas who went into the forest, you were the helpmate [the connotation here is “divine help”] for twelve years you protected them at your side... like a glimmering mirage you light their path. (Hildebeitel, 4)

In the Tamil version of the epic, Draupadi is known as *virapanjali*, she is the “divine helper” of the Pandavas. Draupadi here is shown to be a manifestation of goddess who comes to the fore when the situation demands. The other form makes an appearance once the Pandavas begin their sojourn in the forest, however it never manifests during the time they spend in the palace. If we think about this, metaphorically, the forest can be compared to a man’s buried unconsciousness where his true impulses lie, which are hidden when he is amidst the civilization, lest he should suffer ridicule or be castigated. This could be the reason why the forest Draupadi is different from the ‘palace’ Draupadi. The forest lacks the norms and the rules of the palace and civilization and hence, here the individual can reside without inhibitions. The forest is a place where “the ego... struggling to free itself” (Neumann, 303) in civilization, becomes free. Whether or not this transformation is a part of Draupadi’s personal growth is a matter of another study; it is the discovery of an aspect of the Pandav queen which is in tune with Nature. The forest Draupadi or *virapanjali* is much more potent and visceral. She is more prone to anger and violence than her slightly milder alter ego.

Her first appearance is depicted during the fight between Bhima and Malaiyukacuran, where the demon handles Krishna and Bhima as trifles and is finally overcome by Draupadi in her *Virapanjali* form. The second appearance is depicted during the fight with a demon named

Acalammacuran who is a descendent of Baka. In both these cases, it requires one of Draupadi's heroic and fearful transformations to achieve the demons' defeat.

In many of the southern version of the *Mahabharata* Draupadi is shown to have two distinct forms- *Vishwarupi*, which is her "universal form" and another is *Kalirupa* which is the "form of Kali". Whenever the situation arises, Draupadi is shown to switch from her *vishwarupi* form to her *kalirupa* form and save her husbands. One of the extreme stories surrounding Draupadi's *kalirupa* form is her nightly ritual hunting,

"...and while her husband sleep she roams about from midnight to 3 am, devouring whatever comes her way." (Hiltebeitel, 291)

The *kalirupi* form of Draupadi is represented exclusively in Gingee, which is a town in Tamil Nadu. The myths around Draupadi, which resembles a cult, reinforces the cultural perception of Draupadi as a Goddess and a warrior and she is worshiped so.

One of the most fascinating, albeit slightly farfetched mythology that surrounds Draupadi is that of her being compared to the "three (third?) Eye of Siva" (Book 1, 465). It is possible that this association stems from two instances: the first one being the fire motif. The third eye of Shiva that is fated to bring destruction of the world through fire is similar to Draupadi, being born in fire, and contributing to the destruction of the Kuru clan.

The second instance is slightly more farfetched, on the eve of Draupadi's marriage to the Pandavas, Vyas relates a story to Drupad, who is anxious about his daughter's marriage to five princes, where he relates one of the reasons why the marriage is destined to take place. Lord Mahadev, in order to punish Indra and four others (like Indra) for their insolence, cursed them to be born on earth and endure the sufferings. The five instantly begged forgiveness and Shiva added a reprieve that they will be married to a woman who is an embodiment of Shri and will help them,

He ordained that the woman, the most beautiful in the worlds, who was none other than Shri herself, would be their wife in the world of men. (Book 1, 468)

Another lesser known folktale that revolves around Draupadi is that, the Kauravas tried to use black magic to destroy the Pandavas but were foiled either by the grace of Krishna or the power of Draupadi. The Theyyem dancers of Kerala enact this through their performance. (Pattanaik, 161)

The second recurrent theme about Draupadi is that her 'power' as the goddess which, supposedly, comes from her "fierce virginity" (Hiltebeitel, 75). Draupadi's virginity is a recurrent theme in the epic which is closely related to her chastity as a wife. She is always addressed as "the unblemished one" by everyone around her; the first reference to her virginity comes during the *vaivahika parva* when Draupadi gets married,

...that slender-waisted and great lady regained her virginity from one day to another. (Book 1, 471)

Draupadi's "fierce virginity" is in tune with another element which she is identified with: fire. It is the element out of which Draupadi was born and archetypally speaking fire

represents a lot of things, viz. passion, anger, rage, virility, danger and purification. Draupadi's fire walk is a lesser known but a very popular and important part of the Terukuttu cycle.

The fire walk scene forms an important part of the cult of Draupadi and it occurs during three instances- the first one during her marriage. Villiputuralvar, a scholar of the Terukuttu plays, is the one who makes the oldest connection of this kind:

After thus performing the marriage [with Dharma], she entered and bathed in the very hot loving fire which gave birth to her, and emerged again, with full black hair, a chaste lady like the north star [that is, like Arundhati]; in this way the four [Pandavas] married her. (Hiltebeitel, 437)

This instance was no doubt done to confirm her chastity and to reinforce the idea that she was wholesome to each of her husbands. The epic also mentions that she regained her virginity each time. Side lining the patriarchal overtones that this instance obviously has, this ritual confirms Draupadi's devotion to her husbands which was questioned later by many *Mahabharata* scholars.

One is reminded of the fire test that Sita had to go through in the *Ramayana*. However, the setting here is completely different and so is the aim. For one, the fire test is not a test of her virginity but the fire here is a test of her devotion, a test of her commitment towards each of her husbands.

Secondly, the usage the word 'loving' with the word fire is symbolic. It could mean that the fire did not harm her. It could also be an instance of transferred epithet and could mean that Draupadi was loving, that she was a loving wife to all her five husbands.

The two themes here: the violence of Draupadi as *kalirupi* and the purity of her as a 'chaste virgin' can strike the reader as a strange combination. However, both Kali and Durga are virgins and are portrayed as fierce warriors and taking into consideration the *kalirupi* form of Draupadi, the two themes seem natural. Also, it is not an unheard archetypal image of a virgin woman wielding more power as a reward from the Gods. It could be supposed that the *kalirupi* Draupadi does draw power from her virginity which she uses to execute her enemies.

Draupadi's power may have originated from her asceticism. There are several references in the epic to indicate this

The sons of Pandu have been defeated and have left for the forest...they will practise brahmacharya. (Book 2, 253)

This is also supported by the fact that Draupadi did not bear any children during the thirteen year period. The period of exile was not just of material and sexual deprivation for the Pandavas and Draupadi, but they were expected to live like ascetics and practise austerities throughout this period. This is also seen in the clothes worn by the Pandavas and how they smeared dust on their bodies,

One after another, they [the Pandavas] dressed themselves in deerskins and upper garments...[they] were attired in deerskin. (Book 2, 260)

Patrick Olivelle's translation of the *Samnyasa Upanisad's* describes in detail all the symbols of renunciation for an ascetic. It is a presence of the following objects: a wooden staff, a waterpot carrying holy water, a cloth waistband, a loincloth and a garment to cover the torso. Of these, we see the Pandavas only with the last one. The reason for this incomplete attire could be: Pandavas being *kshtriyas* were not considered to be eligible for a complete renunciation, hence did not carry the other objects. The second reason could be that the family priest Dhaumya travelled with the Pandavas and he being an ascetic followed the rules and could have slowly initiated the Pandavas into complete asceticism. He begins with reciting of hymns that are supposedly recited before the ascetic begins his journey,

Dhomya is the self-controlled priest. He is chanting sama hymns. (Book 2, 262)

This practise is in keeping with the rituals of the teacher reciting hymns for the new recruit who is about to enter asceticism.

Considering all the points mentioned above and the several instances in the epic where ascetics who give up the pleasure of the world are rewarded with special powers (Durvasa, Narada, Parshurama), it seems likely that the *kalirupi* form of Draupadi could have manifested only in the forest because, there, Draupadi became an ascetic.

The *Terukuttu* plays also base a lot of Draupadi's power on her purity, and like Sita, she is made to attend a fire walk to purify herself. One such instance is when she had to go through fire to purify herself of Kichaka's impure touch. She comes out "purified and chaste". This example of purification through fire is also mentioned during the story of Nala and Damayanti, where the hunter who touches a chaste Damayanti, bursts into flames.

The recurrent theme here is of purity and not just sexual purity but also the purity of the spirit. When Bhima risks his life to obtain the Suaugandhika flower, she promises to wear it when she would re-tie her hair at the end of the war, however, at the end when the time came she found one petal of the flower wilted. It is perhaps then that she attempts the second fire walk to prove her purity. It is unclear if this particular fire walk was an attempt to purify herself of Kichaka's touch alone or to purge herself of the intense emotions felt during the Kurukshetra war.

The most noticeable trait of Draupadi is her anger towards the Kauravas for insulting her and the Pandavas for not doing anything. This is also one aspect of her personality which gets stronger and more noticeable as the epic progresses. The burning rage may be responsible for the events in the Karna Parva where she gets vengeance with the death of Dushasana first and Duryodhan later. Dushasana's death scene is quite gory with Bhima smashing his chest open and Draupadi retying her hair smeared with his blood. The act of washing her hair with blood of Dushasana is an act of intense self-defilement. One has to remember that Draupadi was a queen and a mother and for her to step out into the arena was forbidden. And keeping in mind her chastity and purity, the scene becomes shocking.

The act, of killing and ripping Dushshana's chest open, is performed by Bhima who drinks Dushasana's blood,

In the battle, Duhshasana was killed by the illustrious and angry Pandava Bhimasena, who drank his blood.¹(Book 7, 11)

He then takes some more blood to wash her hair and then braids it for her. Later, Draupadi displays an equally vehement desire to inflict eternal suffering on Ashwathama, who killed Draupadi's sons and brother. These two instances display Draupadi's violent side, which isn't far off if we compare it to her *virasakti* form in the forest. One can argue that the battlefield, much like the forest, doesn't follow the laws of the civilization and can bring out the worst in a person.

It is a well-regarded fact that Draupadi was born to create dissent among the Kuru clan. However, her role is much larger than that. Hieltebeitel, while talking about the significance of Draupadi's dark colour states,

“ Draupadi (in mythology) is considered as the incarnation of 'Shri' who had assumed different complexions in different *yugas* – white, red, yellow and blue- which consequently also signifies the decline in the hold of *dharma* with consecutive *yugas*. With the *yuga* of the *Mahabharata* being the last before the *Kaliyuga*, the decline is apparent in the blatant violations of rules done by all characters.”

If looked at this from the archetypal view, the colour black shows a tendency towards entropy and this *yuga* of the epic does show a gradual decay of the existing values. Hence it can be assumed that the incidents that occur during the dice game were not fortuitous, they were predestined.

The myths around Draupadi serve an important function of reflection of the impact she has on the psyche of people. She is both admired and revered and all the myths that depict the polarity of her character are still readily absorbed by the audience.

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