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Draupadi's Political Imagination in the Dice Game of the *Mahabharata*

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Abstract:

The epic *Mahabharata* is a unique narrative text and a collection of many stories – the dice game is one of the events of it. This event perpetuates ideas and ideal visions of Draupadi, her ethical obligation, and the socio-cultural norms of that time. The story of the dice game, in fact, is a byproduct of 'rajasuya sacrifice' that envisions the insight of the real identity of Draupadi. It highlights a tension between womanhood and manhood –ultimately it is an echo of vengeance. The suffering of a woman is a central tendency of the dice game – again it is a woman who fights against injustice and unrighteous action. At first, as a passive woman, Draupadi shows her active role and controls the overall situation – and she finally gives a battling mode of the epic. Her political mocking to Guryodhana and her boom against the elders gives a new outline of politics.

Keywords: political imagination, rajasuya sacrifice, Mahabharata, righteousness, justice.

The epic *Mahabharata* is intimately concerned with the issue of political supremacy. Various readers, at present, ask a common question about the role of males in the dice game – why could they fail to protect the life of Draupadi in front of the grand mass? Again, they create another query - what was the role of Draupadi in the dice game of the *Mahabharata*? Many eastern and western scholars or critics construct these questions frequently. To make a detailed inquiry and add new understanding in human knowledge, this article makes an academic attempt to address these fundamental issues in general. In this paper, I will examine the effects of the dice game within the larger plot of the conflict and scrutinize the entire positions of Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, Shakuni, Dushasana, Bhishma, Drona, Karna, Pandavas, and Draupadi. I will, in short, argue that the dice game reflects the political imagination i.e. a grand

step of Draupadi to counter Kauravas immediately which finally leads the cultural or indirect conflict towards a direct one.

For the first time, the readers observe that the stories and events in this grand epic clearly imitate socio-cultural tensions among the brothers of the same clan, and Gevin Flood writes, "[They] reflect the rise of the theistic tradition and devotion (bhakti) and are concerned with the restoration of righteousness (dharma)" (8). The political steps of Draupadi during the dice game mirror the ideas of her fondness for justice. This epic deals with innumerable social events and John Brockington quotes, "what is absent [in the Mahabharata] does not exist anywhere" (116). In J. A. B. Van Buitenen words, "The epic is a series of precisely stated problems imprecisely and therefore inconclusively resolved, every inconclusive solution raising a new problem, until the very end when the question remains whose is heaven and whose is hell" (39)? The main concern of this article is on the issue of dice games and the role of Draupadi in which she embodies her character of intelligence and audacity in front of male counterparts.

The apocalyptic battle between Kaurava and Pandavas begins with the entry of Draupadi as a common wife of five brothers – three sons of Kunti and two sons of Madri. After forging a political alliance with the king of Panchala –Drupad, Pandavas rebuilt their political power. During her swayambhara, several archers from different kingdoms failed to string the huge bow and finally, Duryodhana had asked Karna to participate and shoot the eye of a fish rotating on a wheel while looking it in a vat of oil to get the hands of the princess of Panchala. In this connection, Devdutt Pattanaik portrays the sense of the bride who audaciously rejects him, "No, the son of a charioteer cannot contend for my hand in marriage" (90). Although the great efforts of valiant princes add no hope in Drupad's broken heart, king Draupad –father of Draupadi- invites a young Brahmin to win the match. Arjuna immediately looks at the image and hits the real object and everyone cheers at him.

The triumph over Drupadi as their common wife in one way for Pandavas is a sign of great victory and in the next her saying to Karna is a component of cultural rejection that humiliates him publicly. After her marriage, the five princes, mother Kunti and Draupadi return to their kingdom and the entire Kuru state ruled by Dhritarashtra – a blind ruler- and ultimately the kingdom gets split into two to avoid a rift among the Pandavas and Kauravas. The division of Kuru lands into Hastinapuri –the capital of Kauravas and Indraprastha –an earthly paradise of Bharata-Varsha and it was a part of Pandavas which was built in the dense forest of

Khandavaprastha. King of Bharata Dhritarashtra –a blind regent- had accepted a division and his elder son Duryodhana resents it and laments which inspires his mama (uncle) Shakuni makes a stratagem plot to offer the complete power to Kauravas.

During the coronation of Yudhishtira as a new king, Pandavas honor Krishna – a strategic man of the political conflict of the Mahabharata- as a chieftain of all the guests. Then, a king of Chedi –Shishupala – a son of Krishna's father's sister, makes one hundred and one inauspicious notes against Krishna; and Krishna beheads him with his discus which he had acquired after destroying the dense forest of Khandavaprastha. The Sabha Parva is principally a description of the rajasuya sacrifice performed by Yudhishtira early in the Parva and it aims to install him as a universal sovereign; it was in general designed to justify the political preeminence of Pandavas over other kingdoms. The grand hall to sacrifice rajasuya is grandeur and the visitors feel speechless with wonder. Duryodhana puts him to shame as long as he falls into the water. The Kuru prince Duryodhan feels anger from the poor remarks of Draupadi "the blinds are born of the blind" (553) and determines to take revenge Pandavas. The aberrant laugh of Draupadi at Duryodhana makes him think, "one day he would take pleasure in Draupadi's humiliation as she has [humiliated him]" (Pattanik 133). He returns from Indraprastha with a broken heart as his opponents had built a magnificent palace out of nothing. The envy of the eldest son of Hastinapur is a root cause of the tragedy of the epic, and Shakuni, then, makes an ill-plot of the dice game as Pattanaik coins the same, "Yudhishtira's may be great, but he has one weakness: he loves to gamble. Invite him to a game of dice. ... He will not be able to say no. Let me play in your stead. You know of my skill with the dice. I can make the dice fall the way I want it to" (139).

Duryodhana thinks it would be a chance to take revenge Pandavas and Draupadi. Despite his horrendous apolitical plan, Dhritarashtra and Yudhistira take the dice game as a tool of uniting the brothers of Kauravas and Pandavas. After getting an invitation from Kauravas to come to Hastinapuri for playing the dice game, Yudhishtira wonders it would be considered to be discourteous not to accept the request and he straightforwardly agrees with it without getting any suggestion from his mother, brothers, Draupadi and Krishna. On the contrary, Duryodhana only overjoys hearing the good words of Shakuni and getting positive information from Yudhishtira on it. His failure of the past match – Pandavas and Kauravas had played the same match when they were children and it crafted an unending antagonism among the princes. Years

ago, at a point, Kauravas had abused the Pandavas as sons of a "whore" – Pandavas were not the real sons of Pandu- and the Pandavas remarked to Kauravas, "You are children of a widow" (Pattanaik 139) –Gandhari had married a goat and it was sacrificed immediately. The previous game had ended in a fight. Unfortunately, the matchmaker Shakuni only was pretending he was a good friend of Kauravas and making a plot to destroy the kingdom cared for by Bhishma – after knowing the reality of the unethical marriage of Gandhari, Bhishma had put Suvala and his family in a dungeon. The dice game is, in fact, an important political plot of the Sabha Parva, and it includes a debatable conspiracy of Shakuni to snatch the power of Pandava in the Mahabharata and in the surface level it was designed to create problem in the political system of Hastinapur. In another sense, it was a political imagination of Shakuni to empower Kauravas in which the steps of Draupadi during that time remained unforgettable. Though it was a ritual game of royal elites, Shakuni used it as his stratagem plot to offer power to Kauravas which made the conflict more serious, direct, and visible and ultimately foreshadowed other issues in the grand hall of Kuru kingdom. At the surface level, the function of that royal game seems relatively straightforward to bring about the recreation of the universe. In Alf Hiltebeitl's words, it symbolizes the accepted cosmological structures of that society and finally, it makes a rift among the rulers of two different kingdoms:

It is not, in fact, difficult to advance the principle that every game, ancient or modern, creates a miniature cosmos, its arena, rules, apparatus, and players comprising a unique spatiotemporal world that reflects and symbolizes aspects of known and accepted cosmological structures. (469)

The Mahabharata is a political and cultural epic that covers social aspects of Aryan society. In this entire text, the position of women is projected – Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, etc serve their husbands as faithful wives. Reeta Rana in her writing clearly views, "This epic provides the context to challenge the patriarchal point of view which molds our realities and limits our vision of individual possibilities" (71). Bhim Nath Regmi observes the event as, "The opening of dice game between those two families turned a new shape of that conflict developed into an open humiliation to Draupadi in the royal assembly attempted to disrobe her" (75) was a part of cultural insult of Draupadi as she was a common wife of five brothers – Kauravas took it as an act of a prostitute. After her union with five brothers of Pandavas, she begins to spend her days in a polyandrous and polygamous relationship as the Pandavas had other wives too.

In the grand hall, Yudhishtira plays dice on behalf of his five brothers and Shakuni represents the side of Kauravas. In the match, the elder brother of Pandavas loses everything and even the males like Dhritarashtra, Bhishma, Vidura, Drona, Kripa remain impotently silent. The prince gradually loses his wealth, servants, animals, palace, brothers and finally loses his wife in the bet. Even at the final stake, no one speaks a single word to protect the life of an innocent woman Draupadi who was not in the grand hall definitely was a portrayal of hegemonic masculinity in the Mahabharata. The game is a byproduct of the rajasuya sacrifice –it had proved the supremacy of Pandavas. Similarly, Kauravas had a hidden desire of defeating the Pandavas. This ritual dice game, however, results in the destruction of the socio-political and cosmic order of the prevailing society. A series of sacrifices like the rajasuya, the snake sacrifice of Janamejaya, the night-raid of Ashwathama at the end of war fundamentally bring negative results. The outcome of the dice match in the epic is played in a faulty way manifest the destruction of social code and fully seem unrighteous. One obvious flaw in the dice game as a ritual is that it is wrongly emplaced. J.Z. Smith has opined the characteristic of the ritual game as:

Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention... place [is what] directs attention. [This] is best illustrated by the case of built ritual environments – most especially, crafted constructions such as temples... The temple serves as a focusing lens, establishing the possibility of significance by directing attention, by requiring the perception of difference. Within the temple, the ordinary (which to any outside eye or ear remains ordinary) becomes significant, becomes "sacred," simply by being there... is, above all, a category of emplacement. (15)

An analysis of the dice game within the framework of the political outline is to identify the issues of males' roles and Draupadi's steps remain significant here. The atrocious acts of Kauravas over Draupadi are signs of the roles of hegemonic masculinity, the celebration of the game to justify their toughness need to categorize political violence against a woman, and the amplification of heterosexuality. R. W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity, "the culturally idealized form of [the] masculine character" (83). Unlike this, Draupadi a heroic princess of the Mahabharata always looks firm and a woman with an inflexible political will. The proud, determined, visionary, and bold constituents of her character of Draupadi have proved her to be an unfathomable woman of the material world.

Saptorshi Das views the character of Draupadi, "[She] protests against a male-dominated world and society, Draupadi's characteristic fight against injustice reflects one of the first acts of feminism – a fight for one's rights; in this case, the right to avenge the wrongs inflicted on her" (223). In the grand hall, her pathos seems tragic and gets no help from her male counterparts. Her humiliation at times crudely bordering on the disgrace of being termed a prostitute and Duryodhana had "...exposed his left thigh and mocked her with a lascivious look" (Pattanaik 146). Her time was not favorable for women –women had not enjoyed equality with men. Das further portrays, "The wife was the counterpart of her husband and both together became a complete person" (226), and using her political will she realized her responsibility towards her husbands and proves her true power at the right time. The loss of everything in the dice game brings Pandavas to unending grief as their common wife was a part of humiliation in front of great people. Draupadi gets humanistic help from Krishna and protects her life and then begs only two things with Dhritrashtra to free her husbands.

If we read the background of Draupadi, as Ashok Yakkaldevi points out, "is a fiercely loyal wife and a hot-tongued critic..." (75). Following the advice of Duryodhana, Dushasana controls and Pushes her to his brother's feet. "The elders maintained a stony silence while the Pandavas hung their heads in shame. For shame stop! I am the daughter of the king of Panchala, your sister-in-law, the king's daughter-in-law, cried Draupadi. No one responded" (Pattanaik 145). As long as Duryodhana tells Draupadi her husbands have lost everything, she raises some appropriate questions. In this connection, Jean-Claudes Carriere states,

There isn't even a breath of life in Bhishma, in Drona?

They see this shame and do nothing. Yudhishtira, had you the right to lose me? If you were lost before playing me, I was no longer yours.

Can one belong to someone who has lost himself? Who can answer me?

Bhishma, answer me! (66)

Her words, here, reverberate the political steps and tries to crush everything righteously. Andrea Custodi points out the character of Draupadi, "[She was] extolled as the perfect wife – chaste, demure, and devoted to her husbands ... to be intellectual, assertive, and sometimes downright dangerous" (213). She is rather different from other women of her time and she is far ahead of her time. It is her ability to use her position with responsibility and insight that shows her true power as a woman. V. Bhawalkar summarizes Draupadi's unique qualities:

Yet the superb qualities of Draupadi like steadfast devotion to duty, the spirit of self-sacrifice, fortitude; courage, capacity for hard work, presence of mind, perseverance, endurance, thirst for knowledge, wisdom to discriminate between right and wrong, and strength to fight against injustice, truth, modesty, forgiveness, softness, and harshness as the occasion demanded – these and such other qualities are seen in Draupadi's life are universal and beyond the limit of time and space. (Bhawalkar 151)

Finally, Duryodhana orders his brother Dushasana to strip her sari so that the people would observe her legendary beauty. During that time Pandavas' position was helpless, other elders had no desire to speak, Dhritarashtra loved his sons much; and ultimately Draupadi remained helpless as a new slave of that unrighteous kingdom. At that crucial juncture, Yututsu tries to protest against that ill action of his brothers. Draupadi with her red eyes utters, Pattanaik states as, "I shall never forgive Kauravas for doing what they have done for me. I shall not tie my hair until I wash it in Dushasana's blood" (147). She gets two boons from the king – she passionately desires to make five brothers free from slavery and requests to return their weapons. She begs two things for her husbands as they could be the tools of taking revenge against Kauravas. Keeping this political will in her mind, she rejects to beg anything for her. As a hot-tongued critic of the unrighteous act, she utters perilous words and makes a hazardous oath of taking revenge against Kauravas. As a loyal wife, she gets a real solution to the problem and makes her husbands free, and utters first-hand instruction –it is a real political step of Draupadi to lead the situation to a battling mode.

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