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## **Ancient Utterances of Feminism in Indian Epic: A Study of Draupadi's Character in *Mahabharata***

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### **Abstract:**

Feminism has been a major critical approach in analyzing the female representation in literary texts. In the Western societies it developed around 1840's through subsequent stages. In the context of Indian literary tradition, an early wake of feminism can be traced to the ancient Indian Epic of Mahabharata. The character of Draupadi has been of great interest as she shows a multifaceted treatment of women. She is the epitome of subjugation, objectification and the enlightenment of women in society. This paper aims to study the character of Draupadi from the epic and look into the various feministic dimension that she personify using the Feminist criticism as a methodology. A modern critical study of the ancient epic will be presented in this paper.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Indian epic, Mahabharata, Draupadi, Objectification.

### **Introduction:**

Feminism had its epoch in the nineteenth century European societies where the position of women in the society was questioned. Females who were tolerating the injustice were now

aware about the prejudice done to them. This Feminism movement also was reflected in the literary studies. The women writers and critics started evaluating the presentation of women in literary discourses. They spoke out against the marginalization of women. In the European context, the Feminism study comprised mainly of the characters as found in novels and dramas. In the Indian context, such Feminism can be traced back to the ancient Epic such as Mahabharata.

The great Indian epic *Mahabharata* has been a source of wisdom since ancient times. Being an integral part of the Hindu religion, it attains a stature of grand narrative. Over the years it has been discussed, analyzed, interpreted by various intellectuals. This paper aims to decode the great discourse of *Mahabharata* from aspects of Feminism. The great Epic of *Mahabharata* is mostly canonized as a religious text. It contains allusion, presence and reference of Gods and Goddesses of the great Hindu mythology. With the presence of *BhagavatGita*- the sermons of Shri Krishna (incarnation of Lord Vishnu), it also becomes a devotional book.

Being a religious book, it gets interpreted chiefly in terms of religious sentiments. However on a closer inspection, the stories are much humanized and relatable. It is not just an epic of super humans, supernaturalism, grand narrative of royals, but about common human life. It is not just heroic storytelling of Gods and Goddesses, King or Queen, but about the common man and his perceptions. The characters are humanized and go through a journey of emotional crests and troughs of their life, as can be found in the character of Draupadi. Although being a royal Princess and Queen, she was not immune to the adversities of a woman. She had to go through a series of suffering in life. Even her royal stature could not spare her from the insults of a woman. In this epic, the early roots of Feminism through the character of Draupadi can be traced.

## **Objective:**

In the literary discourses, the presentation of women have been studied using the Feminism theories. In the Western societies it had been a recent phenomenon, but in the Indian context, such voices of feminism can be traced in its ancient epic. The character of Draupadi as found in the epic *Mahabharata*, has echoed an unique representation of women. It not only highlights the sufferings but also talks about retaliation of women. This paper aims to trace down such incidences and introspect on the Feministic fervours found in this epic.

## **Methodology:**

The present study uses both primary and secondary sources. The Primary sources include study of the ancient epic, *Mahabharata* in its English translation. The secondary sources include reading of the articles, research papers, book reviews and critical receptions relevant to the field of study. It would use Feminism as a methodology to look into the character of Draupadi from a critical point of view.

## **Feminism in the epic Mahabharata**

Feminism as a movement has been popular for a long time in the European continent. The Feminist movement developed in subsequent stages. The first wave of feminism started around 1848 where the foremost exponents like Alice Paul concerned about political rights of women. Around 1960's the second wave of Feminism emerged that challenged patriarchal norms and demanded equal status of women in the society. The formation of the National Organization for Women around 1966 played a crucial role at this stage. The third wave of Feminism paved around 1990's accompanied by publication of *Feminist Manifesto*. It focused on inclusivity and diversity of women experiences. In India, social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar

Chandra Vidyasagar were early precursors who voiced against the oppression of women. The modern feminism movement appeared with formation of All India Women's Conference (AIWC) and Indian Women's Association (IWA). These groups were concerned about the violence on women, dowry related hegemony faced by women, patriarchal negligence of women and marginalization of women in society. These are very recent events but the ancient texts of India had talked of same even in its ancient texts.

Feminism talked about the identity, social position, liberty, respect, equality for women in all the aspects of life. Feminist criticisms, examines the ways in which literature and other arts undermine the political, social and psychological oppression of Woman. Much of it is reflected in literature and other social sciences. Whereas it took waves to develop and construct the concept of Feminism in the European context, the Indian literatures had traces of Feminism since the ancient time. The character of Draupadi in the great epic *Mahabharata* by Saint Valmiki, can be considered as one of the first embodiment of Feminism. Even though being the Princess of the powerful Kingdom of *Panchal*, she is still a victim of subjugation. Even though being the daughter-in-law of the almighty *Hastinapur* kingdom, she still was objectified as a mere entity. Feminism has been the opposing force to such marginalization, exclusion and under-representation of woman in literary and social narrative. Draupadi becomes a representative of universal womanhood, who shows how the gender issues play part in every aspect of human production and experience.

### **Metaphoric Birth from Flames**

In the epic *Mahabharata*, there is mention of the birth of Draupadi from the fire. This event in particular is of great significance and a forecast of her fate in future. Ancient India is

renowned for its rich traditions and notorious for its orthodox perceptions. The birth of a girl child, was viewed as a burden, as a curse, as an unkind gift of heaven. Draupadi walks into her worldly life amidst the fires, which is symbolic to the heat waves of oppressions that she will soon face from the then society. Her coming out of fire, is the metaphoric emergence of feminine spirit against the unwelcoming harsh society, who would despise the birth of a girl child. This episode is also an allusion of another Indian epic *Ramayana*, where the female protagonist Sita had to prove her sanctity and purity by walking through the fire. In both instances the women were not at their own fault but rather a victim of patriarchal actions yet they have to be the one to prove their righteousness. It is very relevant, to the contemporary society, where there is tendency for female feticide. The Government of India had to make laws regarding the sex determination, illegal abortion and feticide, to prevent such cruel acts of the society. Even after thousands of years since the epic was written, the female still has to be born from the metaphoric flames of the society in some parts of our country. She still becomes an equivalent to the burden of dowry in some parts of the un-educated conservative societies. She still has to walk into this world amidst the scorching opposition, negation, and bitter remarks of the society.

### **Objectification of Woman**

The first wave of Feminism in nineteenth century Europe, was a movement against the objectification of woman. Their goal was to recognize women as humans and not as property. Women for long were entitled to a husband's ownership. Women had no identity of their own but rather the status of being a relative to another male counterpart. Women were considered subordinate to man. Her husband was the master to whom she is just an object. A married woman was nothing but a possession of her husband. A good wife would be one who would follow the will and wish of her husband. This vulnerable condition of woman was no different to

Draupadi - the female protagonist of the epic *Mahabharata*. In the epic of *Mahabharata*, there are multiple instances where a woman, gets reified as a thing, a thing of beauty and a thing of possession. In the first *Upa Parva* known as the *Adi Parva*, there is mention of twelfth or the *Swayamvara Parva*. The *Swayamvar* is an interesting practice of the ancient India, widespread among the royals to find a perfect groom for the to be bride Princess. The name *Swayamvar* means ' self-choosing a groom' but the situation was ironical. The power of choosing was not entitled to the bride in the fullest sense. Instead, the Groom was already a chosen one, who emerged victorious or better than the other groom candidates in a common competition. The competitions were mainly displays of physical strength or warrior spirit. It had nothing to do with the emotional compatibility of the Bride-Groom relation. The Bride, the Princess, the woman, simply became an object, a prize won by the Groom , the King, The Prince by display of his skills. In the *Swayambar Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, such an underlying objectification of women can be traced. A *Swayamvar* gets organized for Princess Draupadi, to find a perfect groom for her. And as the epic describes, with the skillful archery, Prince Arjun, wins the contest and they get married.

The objectification of Woman continues as the epic precedes. The Pandavas arrived in the potter's house where their mother Kunti was staying. The event states that the elder Pandava brother Yudhishtira accompanied by Nakul and Sahadeva, arrived with their collection of alms and Arjuna alongwith his newly wed wife Draupadi had arrived there with Bheema. Yudhishtir loudly announced to his mother Kunti about gains of their day to which their mother ordered to divide whatever they have among themselves. Pandavas complied to their mother's order and decided to marry Draupadi. This incident marks how Draupadi, the Princess of Panchal, got reified as an object. She gets divided like things of alms. The ignorant order of Kunti can be

viewed as a misinterpretation and ignorance of one woman over the other. Perhaps their mother was referring to the objects but the Pandavas were not sensitive to that, they being good sons, obeyed their mother's order. They did not clarify or differentiate between Draupadi and alms. The then society never knew, that such a practice will prevail as a hazardous practice that will continue for thousands of years, every time giving a reference to this great event from the epic, thereby legitimizing it as a tradition of Polygamy. It was only some centuries ago, that this has been made illegal by laws in India with active initiatives from social reformers.

### **The Game of Dice –Humiliation inthe Objectification**

Another instance of the objectification of woman can be found in the *SabhaParva* also known as the Game of Dice. The eldest of the Pandava, Samrat Yudhishtir, attended the game as it was part of the Kshatriya honour to attend a competitive game issued by another King. This episode from the ancient epic is relevant, as it highlights how the game of gambling can make a man of virtue turn into helpless being. It is in this game, that Draupadi suffers the highest form of insult ever faced by a woman of that stature. In the Game of Dice, Shakuni, the representative of Duryadhana and the most cynical player of dice, uses his cunningness and defeats Yudhishtir every time. In the process, Yudhishtir, lost his Kingdom, his brothers, his property and even himself. He was so much immersed in the game, that he even puts his own wife as a bet. Draupadi, the *Panchal* Princess, becomes synonymous to just a materialized object. The wife of a man getting equivalent as his property. The most disgraceful incident happens, when Yudhishtir, lost his wife in the bet and Duryadhana then reduces her status to a mere enslaved person. He asked, his own elder sister-in-law to sit on his thighs. His brother, Dushashan, performs the most heinous act of torturing her and attempting on stripping her off clothes in the presence of entire court. All the wisemen, warriors, the King, the Gurus, the elders of Kuru



Kingdom, the almighty men were silent and ignorant to this devilish act. No one dared to protest against such a crime and injustice done to a woman. Only, the God, Shri Krishna had to come for the rescue of a women's dignity. It is only the *maya* (miracle) of Lord Krishna, that turned Draupadi's clothing to an infinite strand of fabric that Dushashan could not strip off. All stood indifferent and helpless to the sufferings of Draupadi against the norms of the game, only the God of Wisdom, responded to such barbaric act and protected Draupadi's dignity. The humans lost their sensibility. The silence of the court dignitaries is similar to the conditions of modern times, where in most cases, the rest of the society remains indifferent to a woman's suffering. The Feminine cry echoes in the air but gets silenced by ignorance.

### **The Voice of the Voiceless –the Female Speaks Out**

The Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, holds significance as a literary work as it stands way ahead of its time both philosophically and contextually. The Feminism as a movement emerged just some centuries ago, but it was in ancient Indian texts, that the voice of the women too was recognized. The author of *Mahabharata*, Saint Valmiki, also brings out the female narrative of Draupadi. She is not just another woman character who is a mere victim or a passive feminine presence but a character of feminine significance. In the episode of 'Game of Dice', in the Book 2, Sabha Parva at Chapter 58, Verse 35, Draupadi asks the question to her husband Yudhistir, " Oh King was it you who were lost first, or was it I ? "

The question is of utmost significance. As per the then norms, a wife is at protection of her husband. It is the husband who has authority over his wife. Now in this scenario, Yudhishtir has lost himself first in the gamble, then he has no personal authority over himself and with this logic he no longer has authority over his wife Draupadi. Then, how can he put someone as a

gambling bet which does not belong to him. It was a question on entire feminine dignity, whether it was ethically correct for a husband to put his wife on stake. The objectification of women gets questioned by Draupadi herself. Can a wife be claimed as a husband's property? Draupadi's argument was supported by Vidur and Vikarna whereas the rest of the courtiers were silent to it. Draupadi's act of questioning was analogous to Third Wave of Feminism which implied the self awareness and enlightenment among the woman about themselves. Women start questioning their own rights and positions.

It is a very interesting thing to notice how the men too came forward to stand against the oppression of a woman. The feminism spirit echoed even in the voices of the male characters. Saint Valmiki shows how even the male characters too become bold enough to stand and avenge the humiliation of Draupadi. Bheema, vowed to avenge this insult by killing the Kauravas, particularly by breaking hands of Dushashana that was indulged in the crime and also by killing him and drinking his blood. He also pledged to kill Dushashana by breaking his very thigh on which he asked Draupadi to sit. Arjuna vowed to kill Karna who spoke foul against Draupadi. Sahadeva vowed to kill Shakuni whose dicing conspiracy led to this malicious event. Even the nature echoed the wrath of this feminine spirit, when jackals started crying signifying an omen befalling upon Hastinapur. King Dhritarashtra, could feel Draupadi's awakened strong force of Feminine wrath and got afraid. Even the mighty emperor, had to bow down to such feminine spirit and offer her three boons to calm her down.

*Mahabharata*, although is an ancient narrative written thousands of years ago, but still it contains in it a wide range of female expression which are much relatable even in the modern times. The oppression, objectification, the sufferings of Draupadi are universal concerns of females all across the world. Any piece of literature is a mixture of fact and fiction, and thus

through this epic the aspects of feminism that existed in the ancient India can be traced . Saint Valmiki, although being a male writer was unbiased and brings out the female aspect of the life as well. On one hand he shows the society where even the woman of royal dignity like Draupadi suffers due to degraded morality and on the other hand he also provides voice to the feminine emotions, her experience and objections. The character of Draupadi, from this ancient epic, becomes an important case study for a feminist critic.

### **Conclusion**

The Epic of Mahabharata holds immense significance from being a religious doctrine. The character of Draupadi is not just a fictional creation but a symbolic representation of women in multiple dimension. An introspection of her character presents the condition of women. She faced misery in being objectified and humiliated. She also voiced her concerns marking the early trace of a women protesting against the society. This under vein of feministic spirit in Draupadi's character becomes an interesting study of early feminism in Indian context.

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