

Archetypal Representation of “Draupadi” in *The Mahabharat*: A Feminist Inquiry into the Hindu Myth

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of "feminism" across literary, digital, and academic platforms underscores its importance in contemporary discourse. This era is characterized by an increased focus on feminist principles and their societal applications. *The Mahabharat*, a popular Hindu epic of Indian Sub-continent; with its intricate characters and plotlines, has inspired extensive interpretations from various perspectives. Among its characters, Draupadi stands out as a significant symbol of female empowerment and resilience against adversity. This study aims to analyze Draupadi's character, emphasizing her role as a symbol of feminist strength within *The Mahabharat*. Employing subversion theory, the research explores how Draupadi challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations. Methodologically, this study conducts a textual analysis of Draupadi's portrayal, examining instances of her assertiveness, compassion, and unwavering commitment to justice. The analysis focuses on her resistance to injustice, particularly regarding her rights as a daughter-in-law and the Pandavas' entitlements. Findings reveal that Draupadi embodies a complex and multifaceted character, challenging conventional gender norms and providing a nuanced perspective on female agency. Her actions and resilience highlight her as a figure of immense significance in Hindu literature. In conclusion, Draupadi's portrayal transcends traditional gender roles, offering a compelling narrative of empowerment and resistance. This study elucidates her enduring legacy and relevance as a feminist icon, reaffirming the significance of feminist ideals in contemporary society.

KEYWORDS:

Literature; Feminism; Gender; Character of Draupadi

Representação arquetípica de “Draupadi” no Mahabharat: uma investigação feminista sobre o mito hindu

RESUMO

A prevalência do "feminismo" em plataformas literárias, digitais e acadêmicas ressalta sua importância no discurso contemporâneo. Esta era é caracterizada por um foco maior nos princípios feministas e suas aplicações sociais. O Mahabharat, um épico hindu popular do subcontinente indiano; com seus personagens e enredos intrincados, inspirou interpretações extensas de várias perspectivas. Entre seus personagens, Draupadi se destaca como um símbolo significativo do empoderamento feminino e da resiliência contra a adversidade. Este estudo visa analisar a personagem de Draupadi, enfatizando seu papel como um símbolo da força feminista dentro do Mahabharat. Empregando a teoria da subversão, a pesquisa explora como Draupadi desafia os papéis tradicionais de gênero e as expectativas sociais. Metodologicamente, este estudo conduz uma análise textual do retrato de Draupadi, examinando instâncias de sua assertividade, compaixão e compromisso inabalável com a justiça. A análise se concentra em sua resistência à injustiça, particularmente em relação a seus direitos como nora e aos direitos dos Pandavas. As descobertas revelam que Draupadi incorpora uma personagem complexa e multifacetada, desafiando normas de gênero convencionais e fornecendo uma perspectiva diferenciada sobre a agência feminina. Suas ações e resiliência a destacam como uma figura de imensa importância na literatura hindu. Concluindo, o retrato de Draupadi transcende os papéis

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tradicionais de gênero, oferecendo uma narrativa convincente de empoderamento e resistência. Este estudo elucida seu legado duradouro e relevância como um ícone feminista, reafirmando a importância dos ideais feministas na sociedade contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Literatura; Feminismo; Gênero; Personagem de Draupadi

Introduction

Literature, often serving as a reflective lens onto societal norms, offers varied perspectives and theoretical frameworks to comprehend the intricacies of community dynamics. Among these frameworks, feminism has evolved over centuries as a philosophy advocating for the oppressed, particularly women, who continue to grapple with the longstanding oppression inherent in their gender identity.

One of the world's oldest religions, Hinduism, is polytheistic. Over the years, as someone who was reared as a Hindu, it became evident to me that the principles of Hinduism are not wholly inflexible. There are, in fact, many ways to understand Hinduism and how it should be practiced; in fact, there are relatively few strict regulations (such not eating beef) that must be followed. Furthermore, polytheism makes it possible to conflate texts that are classified as sacred Hindu texts with nonreligious texts. Hinduism, as is widely believed, draws its knowledge from the Upanishads, the Puranas, and the Vedas (Vohra and Sharma, 2014, p. 100). Nonetheless, the two Hindu epics that have captured the public's attention are the Mahabharata, which was composed in the fourth century BCE, and the Ramayana, which was composed in the fifth century BCE (Basu, 2016b, n.p.).

To integrate into the fabric of society, women have historically confronted multifaceted barriers and hurdles, devoid of inherent rights and subjected to segregation, rejection, and abuse at the hands of men. However, the advent of feminism has catalyzed a transformative shift in the perception and portrayal of women, elevating them from mere subjects of male dominance to agents of authority, leadership, craftsmanship, and education. Yet, even in contemporary contexts, women encounter systemic oppression manifested in gender disparities across realms such as marriage, family, employment, economy, politics, religion, cultural expressions, and linguistic discourse. This paper seeks to scrutinize the narrative milieu of gender oppression surrounding Draupadi in Vyasa's *The Mahabharat* and Draupadi in Mahasweta Devi's story "Draupadi," as translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Shruti Gupte, in her article Mahabharatee: A Feminist Perspective on Mahabharata, in 2020 states:

Although Mahabharata, the longest epic, is written from a male perspective, it has references to many women. Even in today's society, we observe that the lives of women are dominated by men to whom they are associated through different kinds of relationships; the women of Mahabharata are no exception. However, these women dare to question the actions of men, to refuse the directions of men, and to raise their voices against suffering.

Central to both narratives is the thematic core of Draupadi's disrobing, a symbolic act steeped in gendered power dynamics. To facilitate this examination, the paper employs the feminist theory of subversion, which entails the challenging of patriarchal structures and ideologies. Subversion, as a transformative act, involves subverting dominant power structures to disrupt the oppressor's control. The act of Draupadi's disrobing serves as a poignant illustration of the ways in which entrenched patriarchal norms operate upon women's bodies, wherein a woman's dignity is intricately tied to her physical integrity. The subversion of patriarchal norms is exemplified by Draupadi's unconventional marital arrangement of polyandry, which challenges traditional male-centric paradigms. Despite societal discomfort, Draupadi exercises agency in consenting to this arrangement, thereby subverting established gender norms and asserting her autonomy within a patriarchal framework.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyze Draupadi's character in *The Mahabharat* as a representation of feminist strength and resilience, exploring how her portrayal challenges traditional gender roles and societal expectations.
2. To examine the narrative of Draupadi's disrobing and its implications on gendered power dynamics, utilizing subversion theory to highlight her agency and resistance within a patriarchal context.

Research Questions

1. How does Draupadi's character in *The Mahabharat* embody and exemplify traits of female empowerment and resilience against adversity?
2. In what ways does Draupadi's narrative, particularly her disrobing and polyandrous marriage, subvert traditional patriarchal norms and challenge conventional gender roles in Hindu literature?

Review of Literature

The research will employ feminist subversion theory to delve into the subject matter. Subversion, within this framework, entails the strategic undermining of patriarchal structures and ideologies. Scholarly investigations (Mukherjee 2016, Chaudhary 2014, Chakravorty 2016) underscore Draupadi's narrative, particularly the incident of her disrobing, as emblematic of the perpetuation of a discourse wherein the female body is construed as a locus for the operation of male hegemonic systems. The violation of a woman's body, such as through public disrobing, is construed as a loss not only of individual honor but also familial and national prestige. Within patriarchal cultures, practices like polyandry may be perceived as subversions of established norms, despite the apparent discomfort of the women involved, under the guise of serving a greater good (Mukherjee 2016).

Draupadi's disrobing episode marks the culmination of the Pandavas' humiliation in *The Mahabharat* narrative. Her actions disrupt the captors' meticulously planned scheme for her subjugation. Draupadi adamantly refuses to acknowledge her "dishonor," thereby rejecting the notion that feminine purity and honor are contingent upon an inviolable body. Her defiance operates on multiple levels, rendering her a figure of considerable power and complexity. Through her actions, she not only subverts a widely revered narrative but also destabilizes entrenched gender hierarchies. Enduring severe assaults on both her physical and spiritual integrity, Draupadi confronts her oppressors with unwavering defiance, passion, and bravery. Her capacity to challenge the objectification and commodification of women within society renders her an emblematic feminist figure. Her emergence unscathed from the ordeal of disrobing is attributed to her *strishakti*, or feminine power.

Arunima De's scholarly article states that in contemporary Indian subcontinent, *The Mahabharat* is the most well-known Hindu epic. It is not, technically speaking, a religious work, but the idea(s) it propagates about what makes up the appropriate gendered code of conduct still influences the beliefs and behaviors of most Hindus in India. The argument is that *The Mahabharat* legitimizes patriarchal codes that restrict and control women and their bodies in both the public and private spheres in modern Hindu society, and it also promotes a subservient position of women within their interpersonal relationships and the larger domain of society.

Jyoti Singh's scholarly pursuits also center on Draupadi, an iconic female protagonist from *The Mahabharat*, India's preeminent epic. Draupadi vehemently

denounces the immense suffering and injustices inflicted upon her, ultimately reshaping her own identity. Refusing to be relegated to the role of a passive object within a masculine narrative, she asserts her agency as a subject, thereby imbuing her existence with significance. Draupadi embodies resistance against the dominant male constructs of knowledge, authority, and glory through acts of subversion. In doing so, she challenges the pervasive commodification of women within society and rejects patriarchal discourses propagated by political, social, and intellectual forces.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

This study employs feminist subversion theory to investigate Draupadi's character in *The Mahabharat*. Subversion theory, as defined by scholars such as Judith Butler, involves the strategic undermining of dominant power structures and ideologies (Butler 1990). This theoretical lens allows for an examination of how Draupadi's actions and narrative challenge and disrupt traditional patriarchal norms and gender roles. The use of subversion theory is crucial for understanding the nuanced ways in which Draupadi's character asserts agency within a patriarchal context.



Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative approach, specifically a textual analysis, to explore Draupadi's portrayal in *The Mahabharat*. This method involves a close reading of the text, focusing on key episodes that highlight her assertiveness, resilience, and resistance to injustice. By examining these instances, the study aims to uncover the underlying feminist themes and subversive elements present in Draupadi's narrative.

Data Collection

Primary data for this study consists of selected passages from *The Mahabharat* that depict significant moments in Draupadi's story, such as her disrobing and her polyandrous marriage. These passages are analyzed to identify patterns of behavior and dialogue that exemplify her feminist strength and subversion of gender norms. Secondary sources include scholarly articles and books that provide critical insights into Draupadi's character and the broader themes of feminism and subversion in Hindu literature (Mukherjee 2016; Chaudhary 2014; Chakravorty 2016).

Data Analysis

The data analysis involves coding the selected passages to identify recurring themes and motifs related to feminist strength, resilience, and subversion. Each instance of Draupadi's assertiveness and resistance is categorized and analyzed to understand how it contributes to the overall depiction of her as a feminist icon. The analysis also considers the cultural and historical context of *The Mahabharat*, as well as the symbolic significance of Draupadi's actions.

Ethical Considerations

Given that the study involves analyzing literary texts, ethical considerations primarily pertain to the respectful interpretation of cultural and religious narratives. The research aims to approach *The Mahabharat* with sensitivity, acknowledging its importance in Hindu culture and literature. Additionally, the study strives to avoid anachronistic interpretations by situating Draupadi's actions within the context of the epic's setting and the norms of its time.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is its reliance on textual analysis, which may be subjective and influenced by the researcher's interpretations. To mitigate this, the study incorporates multiple scholarly perspectives and critiques to provide a balanced and comprehensive analysis. Another limitation is the potential for cultural bias, which the researcher addresses by engaging with diverse scholarly sources and maintaining an awareness of the cultural context.

Discussion and Analysis

In Hindu society, mythological narratives retain relevance, yet contemporary shifts in cultural and educational paradigms are shedding light on the underlying ethos. The emergence of a void, synonymous with a diminishing spiritual and moral essence, is discerned, as elucidated by Devdutt Pattanaik's observation of transformative shifts over the past five decades. Notably, postmodernism has challenged Western scientific paradigms, revealing inherent biases within colonial discourse and prompting former colonies to assert equitable recognition for their cultural beliefs in an era dominated by political correctness.

Within Hinduism, Vishnu embodies esteemed virtues such as discipline, detachment, obedience, and justice, epitomizing nobility in his various incarnations. The epic Ramayana serves as a conduit for Vishnu's narrative, yet interpretations of his character vary depending on the lens through which the epic is perceived. When viewed as quasi-historical, Rama's portrayal transforms from a symbol of perfection to that of a mere monarch; conversely, in the realm of fiction, his spiritual magnificence is eclipsed, rendering him a product of imaginative creation. Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of the conflict between Rama's historical persona and his symbolic significance, particularly amid the politicization of Hindu nationalist agendas.

Mythological narratives, as literary embodiments of religious ideals and societal norms, wield considerable influence in shaping cultural identities and behavioral patterns. *The Mahabharat*, an ancient Indian epic, has undergone myriad reinterpretations across diverse media platforms, perpetuating patriarchal norms and narratives. From Kisari Mohan Ganguli's English translations to Devdutt Pattanaik's "Jaya," patriarchal constructs are subtly entrenched, with male protagonists dominating the narrative landscape. Moreover, societal preoccupations with skin fairness persist, exemplified by Draupadi's relentless pursuit of beauty enhancements, juxtaposed against her realization of the empowering allure of her inherent dark-skinned identity.

Lata Bhardwaj, in her research paper, "The Unheard Voice of Draupadi" states:

The status of women and the feminine principle is presented keeping in mind the atrocities of not only Draupadi but everyday woman of present scenario. Feminine literature has been subject to many great changes over the past few years. With the help of the well-built characteristics of Draupadi, she has been shown as the woman who faces most pains and is the most sacrificing lady. She is a highly principled woman who forgives the murderer of her sons only because he is a brahmin. And she does not want his mother to face the same agony.

Central to Draupadi's evolving identity is her complex role as the wife of the five Pandava brothers, a fate sealed by Vyasa's decree. Vyasa's additional "virginity boon" exemplifies patriarchal impositions on female sexual autonomy, underscoring societal expectations of purity and piety. Despite societal constraints, Draupadi emerges as a formidable figure in political machinations, serving as a steadfast confidante to the Pandavas and defying conventional gender roles. Her assertive demeanor challenges entrenched notions of femininity, forging a distinct female identity that transcends societal expectations.

Draupadi and Patriarchy

Within the prevailing patriarchal paradigm, Draupadi's portrayal within the epic narrative of *The Mahabharat* often fails to adequately acknowledge her significance, relegating her to a position of perceived inconsequence. Despite this, Draupadi emerges as a notably undervalued heroine within the epic, confronting challenges shared by female characters across both the Ramayana and *The Mahabharat*, wherein their autonomy is frequently subordinated. Chitra Banerjee articulates this sentiment eloquently, lamenting the portrayal of 'strong women' in these epics as enigmatic figures, whose thoughts and emotions are often deemed inscrutable until they make the ultimate sacrifice for the male heroes, thereby relegating their roles to secondary status within familial hierarchies.

In a milieu dominated by masculine authority and patronymic norms, Draupadi occupies an exceptional position, characterized by her solitary demeanor and the catalyst she becomes for a tumultuous confrontation among men. Her predicament reaches a climax when her eldest spouse, Yudhishtira, stakes her in a game of dice, inadvertently placing her at the mercy of fate. Despite her assertive disposition, Draupadi's loyalty to her five brothers remains unwavering, a loyalty that, according to Alleyn Diesel, renders her a coveted and contentious figure, inciting internal conflict and societal discord.

Draupadi's ambiguous legal status further compounds her predicament, as she is paradoxically categorized as both a wife and a prostitute due to her multiple marital ties. This paradoxical categorization underscores male pride and dominance within the epic narrative, exemplified by Karna's public derogation of Draupadi. Yet, rather than succumbing to the brutal treatment she endures, Draupadi's resilience is emboldened, her experiences of adversity serving to fortify her resolve for justice and retribution.

Enduring humiliation, torment, and deprivation throughout her existence, Draupadi draws strength from her resilience, triumphing over masculine oppression and violence, thereby fostering communal healing. These experiences, as Diesel observes, epitomize the triumph of feminine strength, reaffirming Draupadi's unwavering resistance to male hegemony.

The narrative nuances of Draupadi's complex relationships underscore her subjugation within a system that regards women as mere possessions. Even within her matrimonial arrangement, Draupadi's agency is overshadowed by patriarchal dictates, exemplified by her exchange as a wager among her husbands. Moreover, her defiance of societal norms, as evidenced by her questioning of royal authority and marital propriety within the assembly, marks a significant departure from convention, constituting an act of

subversion unparalleled in her time. As Das contends, Draupadi's audacity to challenge male-dominated structures in the Sabha court epitomizes a radical departure from the norm, confronting entrenched injustices head-on.

Conclusion

The selected literary works have garnered significant commercial success within contemporary Indian English literature, evidenced by their widespread distribution and translation into regional languages. Their portrayal of marginalized voices within *The Mahabharat* has captivated the attention of contemporary culture, leading to their enduring influence within literary circles in India and beyond. This success marks a pivotal moment of societal transformation, wherein the narratives and experiences of women are not only acknowledged through journalistic or documentary means but also enshrined within the realm of historical fiction. This solidification of femininity as a potent and influential entity underscores a paradigm shift in societal perceptions.

These literary achievements empower women to challenge the patriarchal and phallogocentric narratives perpetuated by both the epic itself and broader societal constructs. Through their narratives, women are afforded agency to rebel against entrenched norms and assert their individual voices. Consequently, these texts serve as poignant testaments to the resilience and determination of women in their ongoing struggle to articulate their identity and assert their rightful place within society. They stand as tangible embodiments of women's resistance and their relentless pursuit of self-expression and empowerment.

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