

FROM YAJNASENI TO NATHVATI, ANATHAVAT : REREADING IRAWATI KARVE'S YUGANTA

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Abstract

Mahabharata is an infinite repository depicting human lives with their human predilections and vulnerabilities. Irawati Karve's Yuganta , furnishes an erudite collection of essays written from anthropological perceptive. Karve's essay on 'Draupadi 'recoups the female agency from the epic who is often held responsible for the battle between two clans. Irawati Karve does not venerate Draupadi nor does she scorn her. She, rather presents her with her strengths, anguishes, agitation and mortal inadequacies. She accentuates how Draupadi stands as an epitome of Pandavas' unanimity and solidarity. Her journey from the sacrificial fire to being the wife of Pandavas is presented in an unbiased manner. A Comparative discourse on Draupadi and Sita provided by Irawati Karve in Yuganta gives an insightful juxtaposition on Idealism vs. Realism. The paper attempts to demystify how the princess not only experiences splendour and eminence of her husbands but also the disgrace and ordeal they face. The paper also disentangles how the contemporary socio-political milieu , rivalries and alliances render Draupadi's character multidimensional. The Research Paper aims to unravel all the episodes in her life from being Yajnaseni to Pandavas' wife, forced exile, the game of dice, and the final war that divulge her pain, agony and suffering as depicted in Karve's Yuganta.

Keywords: Multidimensional Character , Ordeal ,Mortal Inadequacies, Idealism vs. Realism, War.

INTRODUCTION

Mahabharata is an unflagging archive that underscores the indigenous , cultural , political and literary wealth that is organic to the Indian psyche. As one of the key manuscripts of the Indian Knowledge Systems , it offers scholarly commentary on military strategy , politics, state-craft, dharma shastra etc. If Bhishma ,Vidura , and Vasudeva Krishna are held to be paragon of scholarship , politics/state-craft , and diplomacy , Kunti and Draupadi too are known to be *vishruta rajasmatasu* (well-known among assembly of kings) , and *bahushruta* (learned).

Irawati Karve's *Yuganta* , the retelling of Mahabharata presents analysis of chief characters from the epic from anthropological perspective and against the background of Kshatriya code of conduct. Her stoutly judicious interpretation and assessment of characters from the epic furnish the readers with a panoramic and reasonable understanding of myriad uncommon episodes in their lives and their corresponding stances , and actions. The comparative glimpses into conspicuous idealism of Ramayana and its characters and unembellished realism of Mahabharata with glaring human flaws and weaknesses is indeed a feast for literary enthusiasts.

DISCUSSION

The essay on Draupadi in Karve's *Yuganta* begins with comparative insights into characters of Draupadi and Sita. Though both are daughters of the earth and are married in a Swayamwara ,their lives are marked with some distinguishing episodes that are diametrically opposite to each other. Draupadi is different from Sita on the ground of birth since Sita is found in a furrow while ploughing and Draupadi and her brother were desired for and emanated from the sacrificial fire (*Yajna*) to avenge the insult meted out to King Drupad by Dronacharya.

The grandeur and resplendence associated with Draupadi is reflected in various prestigious appellations she was known with. Draupadi was also known as *Panchali* (daughter of *Panchal* King), *Krishna* (Dark), *Yajnaseni* (born off sacrificial fire), *Parshati* , (daughter of *Prishati*) etc. The multitude of sub-plots in the epic and the corresponding tales , relations , alliances and rivalries culminate into rendering Draupadi's character multi-dimensional. Juxtaposition of stories of Bhishma, Shantanu, subplot of Abhimanyu and Uttara's alliance , the animosity of Kauravas towards Pandavas, personal rivalries ,accounts of prolonged association of Guru Dronacharya and Kripacharya and the dynamics and politics of power among other ruling kings add to the complexities of the plot of epic rendering it intricate and vast in its scope. These rivalries and animosities have adverse and undesirable effects on Draupadi's life. Whether it's a game of dice , exile or the final war , its Draupadi who is at the receiving end of disgrace, humiliation and irrevocable loss. Pandavas do suffer dishonour and injustice but the tragedy of Draupadi is foregrounded in the epic as well as *Yuganta*, the literary derivative of the epic.

Irawati Karve's view is significant here:

“ Draupadi's troubles were human , brought on people of this world and, particularly , by her own husbands. In almost every episode , insult is piled upon insult , constantly adding fuel to the hatred in her heart”. (Karve, 83)

Karve exemplifies her view by accentuating how despite having five husbands , she is left to suffer as a widow (*Nathavati* , *Anathavati*) especially after the ignominy faced during the game of dice. It is indeed appalling to see her being dishonoured who is born from the sacrificial fire , who hails from a royal family and whose husbands are mightier than many contemporary warriors. She is left to endure the ordeal and menace all on her own. Bhishma ,(the supreme commander of Kauravas' army) ,Dhritarashtra (the Kuru King) and Vidura ,(an exemplar of steadfast dharma, prudence and impartial judgement) too silently witness her dishonour as if they, too ,were helpless victims of the circumstances and puppets in the hands of miscreant Kauravas. She belongs to a royal lineage and has valiant confederates but she is left to suffer on her own when she is dishonoured. It sounds unrealistic when neither her husbands nor the senior members of the family come to her rescue though they could have attempted to prevent the menace.

It wouldn't be wise to expect a courteous behaviour and the Kshatriya Code of Conduct from Duryodhana ,Dushasana and Karna who were driven by the motive of destroying Pandavas. Their actions and talk reflect their malicious intent and rancorous objective. What appears unjustified is the silence maintained by Bhishma ,Dhritarashtra and Vidura , who were the pillars of Hastinapur Empire and whose words should have been the maxims for the young Kauravas and Pandavas but their advice is discounted. At the same time ,the urge to win the game of dice and willingness to put Panchali at the mercy of those rogues sounds gratuitous. Is it just an uncontrollable obsession to be victorious in the game of dice or male-chauvinism that compelled Pandavas to be so unreasonable and arbitrary ? Draupadi's honour, her individuality and her say is capriciously overlooked by the Pandavas.

The battle of Kurukshetra brought about the ultimate catastrophe. It epitomised not just the end of the Kauravas' and Pandavas' clan but also the end of the epoch (Dvapara yuga). Karve accentuates a view that every misery and distress of the age was endured by Draupadi personally. Her young ,dashing and valiant sons were killed in the war. Her father's clan was almost destroyed. Hastinapur , the kingdom that was earlier buzzing with kinsmen, friends, gurus, princes, princess, their children and senior citizens was then reduced to an empire of widows and small children. She along with Yudhishtira was going to rule the kingdom that was devoid of young soldiers but full of widows and small children and senior citizens. Here, Irawati Karve's views are important to be considered.

“But that Draupadi was the cause the war in the Mahabharata is definitely not true. The seeds of war had been planted on the day Dhritarashtra was denied the throne because of his blindness and Pandu was made king.” (Karve, 85)

Karve, here explicates the contemporary socio-political reality with reference to the animosity between sons of Pandu and sons of Dhritarashtra right from their childhood days. So , naturally that was before Draupadi's entry in Hastinapur. So also, there is a difference in the approach of sons of Pandu and sons of Dhritarashtra. Pandavas asked for their share in Hastinapur Kingdom and not the entire empire whereas Kauravas were adamant about possessing the entire kingdom. Karve, here refutes the allegations against Draupadi that she was the chief cause of the war. She does not venerate Draupadi nor does she malign her character.

Draupadi hails from a royal lineage , and a noble family. Her marriage to the Pandavas strategically defeats one of the malevolent intentions of Duryodhana - severing Kunti's three sons from Madri's two sons. As long as Draupadi was alive , Pandavas not just remained united ,but could also built a great support system from King

Drupada and his son. Draupadi was and remained the source of Pandavas' unanimity and spirit of camaraderie. Here, Karna's observations are remarkable as put forth by Irawati Karve in *Yuganta* :

"If we could not destroy Pandavas when they were friendless, we certainly can not do so today. Now they have allies, and what is more , they live in a different country. Besides, Drupada is a man of principle , not a greedy king. Drupada's son is devoted to Arjuna." (Karve,78)

It validates how Pandavas' position was shielded and fortified by Draupadi. Karna and Kauravas too were apprehensive of vanquishing them owing to their marital alliance. Thus, marrying Draupadi proved pivotal for Pandavas in myriad different ways. In the game of dice too, she saved the Pandavas from sheer devastation and disintegration of Pandavas' clan. Dhritarashtra's intervention that sprang from the anxiety of future ordeal of the Kuru clan as a result of his sons' indecent deeds in the game of dice allowed Draupadi to save her husbands from sheer ruin. On request of granting favour from Dhritarashtra, she freed her husbands. Here, too, she did not seek any favour to fulfil her desire or to settle the scores with Kauravas. Her dauntless and prudent behaviour was a saving grace for the Pandavas. Her indomitable spirit and stout-hearted conduct has been much appreciated by Karna in the epic.

As Irawati Karve quotes it, " Like a boat, she has saved the Pandavas when they were about to drown in a sea of disgrace." (Karve,79)

As per Jain Purana , Draupadi is believed to have loved Karna. Irawati Karve does not validate this perspective / interpretation vis-à-vis Draupadi's character in *Yuganta*. The critical edition of the epic does not have any reference towards Draupadi's love for Karna. So also, there is no anecdote that substantiates a belief /incident that Karna endeavoured to attain her in Swayamwara. Irawati Karve accentuates that in *Yuganta*,- "The Draupadi of the Mahabharata was stormed and raged, but to the last moment she remained a faithful wife. There is not a single incident in her life that casts the slightest suspicion on her". (Karve, 86)

It explicates how Draupadi remained loyal to her husbands till the end of her life. Irawati Karve calls her a daughter of the earth – " Draupadi was a true daughter of the earth because her feet were firmly planted on the ground , her heart was in the world defined by her marriage and family, within the boundaries of her father's house, father in law's house and her own palace". (Karve, 88)

Draupadi could have gone back to her father's house when the Pandavas were exiled. She chooses to be with them and arranges to send her children to her father's place for their safety and education. Panchali , a woman of a fiery birth , daughter of king Drupada, wife of dauntless Pandavas , without reluctance agrees to tread the arduous terrain for thirteen long years along with her husbands. There were challenges at every walk of their life during exile whether in the form of unknown enemy or probability of Kauravas identifying their location. Jayadrath's attempt to abduct Draupadi and Kichaka's attempt to harass her during exile validate how difficult the survival had been for Draupadi. If Yudhishtira is known for his righteousness , then Draupadi should also be appreciated unquestionably for her dutifulness.

The epic does not paint a rosy picture of any character nor does it debase it. It delineates their human follies and weaknesses. In the epic, we witness Yudhishtira's obsession with the game of dice, Bhima's mighty but brash behaviour (at times) and Arjuna's valour but lack of understanding of state-craft. Neither the epic nor *Yuganta* try to presuppose anything that may tarnish the image of any character gratuitously and unreasonably. Karve, in *Yuganta* pinpoint follies of Draupadi in unbiased manner. Her laughter at a baffled Duryodhana in their Mayasabha (Palace) in the presence of many is treated as her discourteous gesture. According to Karve, she could have treated him respectfully but this insult not only aggravates the existing animosity towards Pandavas but also instigates him to avenge. Insulting someone by making derogatory remarks regarding one's deformity (here ,Dhritarashtra's blindness) does not suit a the daughter-in-law of the Hastinapur Empire and it violates the Kshatriya code of conduct.

Karve believes that the questions posed by Draupadi towards the end of the game of dice too worsen her predicament . Her query whether Dharma who was a slave and had lost right over everything could stake Draupadi's freedom renders everyone speechless. Irawati Karve underscores a view that her questions perplexed everyone in the court.

"For a young bride to show off her intelligence in the presence of her elders was a grave mistake. This mistake Draupadi apparently never understood and Dharma never made her aware of it. What she had done was the result of her earthy, violent but basically simple nature". (Karve,92)

Here, one may have a slightly contradictory view from that of Irawati Karve's standpoint. Draupadi spoke in the assembly because she was disrobed in the court in the presence of stalwarts of Hastinapur. She spoke as she

was infuriated with a mindless decision of her husband – Dharmaraj of putting his own wife at stake being blinded with an obsession of the game of dice. She spoke out of sheer agony and humiliation caused by the flagrantly impudent remarks of Kauravas and Karna against the eldest daughter in law of Kuru clan and Hastinapur. She spoke out of annoyance and disappointment emanating from the silence (maintained by) and helplessness of everyone in the court of Hastinapur.

“Draupadi’s questions had put all of them in a dilemma. Bhishma hung his head. Dharma was ready to die of shame. Draupadi was standing there arguing about legal technicalities like a lady pundit when what was happening to her was so hideous that she should only have cried out for decency and pity in the name of Kshatriya Code..... Allowing their own daughter-in-law to be dragged before a full assembly, dishonouring a bride of their own clan in the assembly of the men, was so against all human, unwritten law, that quibbling about legal distinctions at that point was the height of pretension.”(Karve, 90)

Here, too, one may disagree to agree with Irawati Karve’s perspective. Draupadi’s predicament can be well defined with a term ‘fight or flight’ first described by American physiologist Walter Cannon in 1920s. The fight-or-flight response is also known as the acute stress response, that indicates a physiological reaction that occurs when something mentally or physically petrifying or dreadful happens. Draupadi rather than wallowing in self-pity chooses to combat the situation. Her act may sound desperate but that was her survival instinct. As defined by Walter Cannon, the American Physiologist, the acute stress response (fight or flight) refers to the response/reaction of an individual towards an alarming or spine-chilling situation. The plight of Draupadi is no different. Hence, her questioning can not be completely disregarded being uncalled for nor was it her pretension. It was her reaction to the disgraceful situation that befell her and the mute spectators in the assembly of Hastinapur just witnessed it.

The last words of Draupadi as depicted in *Yuganta* reflect her faith in Bhima who not only saved her gracefully from multiple ordeals but also settled the scores with the foes who dishonoured her such as Duryodhana, Dushasana, Kichaka and Jayadrath.

“In our next birth be the eldest, Bhima; under your shelter we can all live in safety and joy”. (Karve,95)

It indeed reveals how wholeheartedly Draupadi appreciates Bhima’s gesture and action. She is also confident if Bhima is born the eldest in the family, safety of all is ensured. Actions of Duryodhana, Dushasana, Kichaka and Jayadrath were no less than heinous crimes who tried to dishonour the daughter in law of Hastinapur Kingdom. The retribution inflicted on them by Bhima underscores not only his valour but also his eye for an eye attitude towards anyone who even thinks about maligning Draupadi’s image.

CONCLUSION

Patriarchy has always prevailed at every significant milestone of Human civilization. As a result of which docility and servility of women is not uncommon. The Mahabharata is not an exception to it. In an archive of a male dominated society, Draupadi interweaves her own saga of love, passion, hatred, discrimination, honour and dishonour. She stands firmly against all odds and proves she is a woman of fiery birth. Her saga is as complex as her male counterparts. Irawati Karve’s interpretation and analysis of Draupadi’s character is indeed contemporary and not time-bound. A woman living in a man’s world, leaves no stone unturned to create her own space. Like all others in the epic, she too is flawed but never fails to be at par with her male counterparts. Irawati Karve in her magnum opus- *Yuganta* does not romanticise Draupadi nor does she disparage her. She presents her as a human being with her strengths and flaws.

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