



# CONSTRUCTING DRAUPADI'S PHILOSOPHY OF JUSTICE

Jessica Joseph

## ABSTRACT

The words feminist philosophers are often associated with women like Ayn Rand, Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler among others. Hence, it is not common for a mythological character to be regarded as a philosopher. Through this essay, I aim to deconstruct the essence of being a philosopher. Furthermore, I inspect the life of Draupadi, the protagonist of the Indian epic 'Mahabharata.' Existing scholars regard Draupadi as the first feminist of the Hindu culture for her defiance of the social order and outspoken nature. This essay, however, examines her various life instances through a philosophical lens in an effort to establish her as not only a feminist icon but also a philosopher of her time. It aims to inspect Draupadi's philosophy of justice and rights.

Keywords: feminist philosopher, Draupadi, Mahabharata, justice, equality.

## INTRODUCTION

To understand the notion of who is a philosopher, we must first understand what philosophy is. Etymologically speaking, philosophy is a combination of two Greek words, *philein sophia*, meaning lover of wisdom. Thus, a lover of wisdom refers to any area of intelligence including but not limited to business, politics, human relations, etc. (1) (Roark, 1982). Apart from concrete subject matters, philosophy is also concerned with abstract concepts which generally start with a series of questions; do we have a soul? Does God exist? Is there life after death? Therefore, philosophy can also be regarded as a set of questions and answers. Plato also considered philosophy to be a process of constant questioning. Questioning is then followed by criticism. The goal of criticism is to eliminate shoddy reasoning and establish concepts with greater clarity and meaning. In this regard, John Dewey noted "...philosophy is inherently criticism, having its distinctive position among various modes of criticism in its generality; a criticism of criticism as it were.

Criticism is discriminating judgement, careful appraisal, and judgement is appropriately termed criticism wherever the subject matter of discrimination concerns goods or values." (2) (Dewey 1925, 398)

Sherer, Facione, Attig, and Miller, in their *Introduction to Philosophy*, were also of the opinion that philosophy begins with an attitude of wonder. Philosophical wonder "leads to serious reflection on the more fundamental or more general questions that emerge in a variety of particular cases" (3) (1979:8). This sense of wonder leads to critical thinking, reasoning, and questioning.

From the aforementioned viewpoints, it can be concluded that it is not possible for philosophy to have one fixed definition. However, through an eclectic approach, philosophy can be viewed as a quest for wisdom through critical thinking and reasoning. Therefore, someone who pursues this method of inquiry might be referred to as a philosopher.

## I

### DRAUPADI: A PHILOSOPHER

The next part of this essay is focused on deconstructing Draupadi's character and associating those characteristics to that of a philosopher.

Draupadi, daughter of King Drupada was the main female protagonist of the Indian epic 'Mahabharata.' She was also referred to as Panchaali, princess of Panchaal. Being the granddaughter of Prushata, she was known as Parsati. Born of sacrificial fire, she was called Yajnaseni and in reference to her dark complexion, she was given the name Krishnaa. Her marriage to the five Pandavas also gave her the name Panchami.

Draupadi was renowned for her beauty and was sought after by all the men in her kingdom. Vyasa, the author of Mahabharata, recounts Draupadi to have a dark complexion, lotus-like eyes, dark curly hair and a captivating fragrance like that of a blue lotus. She was not just extremely beautiful but also an incredibly smart and virtuous woman. She was one of the few women in Hindu mythology to voice her opinions, stand up against injustice, and question the elders. Due to her extensive knowledge in several areas, her family appreciated and supported her opinions and ideas. Draupadi's father, Drupada, permitted her to pursue an education, unlike many other women of her time. "Drupada had engaged learned Brahmanas for the education of his sons. Draupadi also joined them and became an expert in Political Science. She became known as Pandita and grew up to be a charming maiden admired by all" (4) (Bhawalkar, 2002:3). Draupadi had an excellent memory, was well-versed in numerous topics, and was a swift learner who was always in pursuit of knowledge. Draupadi's education was perhaps the reason that gave her immense strength, courage and confidence which was alien to most women of her time. It was this outspoken, resilient, and aggressive nature of Draupadi that gave her the title of the first feminist figure.

Marriage to the five Pandavas; Yudhishthir, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakul and Sahadeva was one the most significant episodes in Draupadi's life. Drupada had arranged for a swayamvar for Draupadi to pick her own husband among the best of potential suitors in the kingdom. However, the swayamvar was simply a charade organised by Drupada because only Arjuna was capable of fulfilling the task set as a condition in order to win Draupadi's hand in marriage. This was a clever political tactic that ensured Arjuna would win and thus become an ally for Panchaal.

As expected, Arjuna wins the challenge and claims Draupadi as his wife. As soon as Arjuna, along with his brothers and Draupadi arrive at their home, they ask their mother Kunti to see what they had brought home. Unknowingly, Kunti instructs the brothers to share whatever they had

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida's method of deconstruction is applied in this context. It is the method of literary analysis that opposes the assumptions of structuralism (<https://www.sociologygroup.com/deconstruction-theory/>). Since I am engaging with a mythological character, the method of deconstruction is appropriate to the context.

brought home equally among themselves (assuming that it was the usual alms that the brothers had collected). Draupadi does not have a say in this whole arrangement simply because she's viewed as a possession. Hence, she becomes a possession of the five husbands against her will. Draupadi then questions their behaviour: "is a woman her husband's property? Is she an object that can be gambled?" (5) (Mankekar, 1993:474)

Draupadi's disrobing in front of a court full of men while she was menstruating was the most humiliating experience a woman of her stature could go through. She constantly questioned Yudhisthir's right to stake her after he had himself become a slave to Duryodhana. Draupadi goes on to challenge the kings' dharma (religious obligation), specifically those who were present in the assembly. She challenges the moral acumen of the kings. Draupadi is defying the norm, which was unheard of during the period of the Mahabharata, by criticising the conduct of both her husband and the dignitaries present. Draupadi's question could be viewed as: not as an antiquated question of the wronged virtuous queen whose integrity has been put on stake, rather it holds as much importance and relevance because it is a question of the protection of those who find themselves unprotected by a system in a court full of the most powerful kings of the time, here was a woman who dared to stand for herself and speak up, aloud, against male perpetrated injustices. (6) (Das, 2014:228)

In an era when women were expected to submit to the patriarch, Draupadi was a woman of wisdom, courage, and practicality who didn't hesitate to speak her mind. She was critical in questioning the legitimacy of the patriarchal norms and traditions. As previously mentioned, a philosopher refers to a person engaging in critical thinking and reasoning, unafraid to oppose the status quo. Therefore, Draupadi was not just a feminist but also a philosopher for her scepticism of the patriarchal society.

## II

### DRAUPADI IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Mythological works have made a significant contribution in forming and defining Indian culture and tradition. Indian epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata exalted the triumph of justice and truth as the principles that govern human thought and behaviour. *Ramayana* was known as the story of Lord Rama whereas the *Mahabharata* celebrated the bravery and chivalry of the Pandavas. Therefore, these epics were primarily focused on the lives of men and the perspectives of women were hardly represented. Throughout the epics, the identities of the women characters were dependent on their relationships with men. They were portrayed as mothers, daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law. This is evident in Draupadi's plight when at the time of her birth, she was named after her father Drupada and her identity came to be defined by that of a man. In order to emphasise women's place in the patriarchal society, Simone de Beauvoir explained, "She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of essential. He is the subject; he is the absolute. She is the other." (7)

Simone de Beauvoir in her book *'The Second Sex'* claims that while men operate in a universe that is infused with their own point of view and identify themselves from the same vantage point and position from which they observe themselves, women are often framed by men as "the other."

Men are the subject whereas women become the object because their identities are defined not by them, but by men. Not only does she lose control over her identity but also her body, for that too is considered to be a man's possession. Many works of literature highlight the paradigm in which women are exploited in order to satisfy the physical, emotional, and sexual desires of men.

In the context of the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi's disrobing was not just to humiliate her but also her husbands. Draupadi's question to the elders of the court left everyone speechless. Yet, she was dragged by her hair and humiliated in front of all the dignitaries present. The Kauravas viewed Draupadi to be a prostitute and believed that it was permissible to strip her in front of the people since the Vedas do not condone polyandry. Draupadi made a prayer to Krishna and each time Dushasana pulled her sari, he covered her with an endlessly long fabric. Draupadi refuses to accept her horrible tragedy and prevails over all odds despite being used by male predators who take pleasure and delight in her misery. It took Draupadi's humiliation for her to assert that the idea of "dharma," or justice, in a patriarchal society is already skewed and that men are free to use, alter, and construct it as they deem fit. Draupadi, a victim of a misogynistic culture, rejects the brutality she has experienced by accepting her position and refusing to be tormented. Instead of suffering in silence, she chose to condemn society's misogynistic attitude as a way to express her anger and frustration. In a study of Mahasweta Devi's *Dopdi* and Vyasa's *Draupadi*; "Vyasa and Mahasweta Devi see their heroines in an unexpected circumstance and demonstrate how, at the most vital moment, they uncover their power inside, establishing their feminine identities. Both ladies represent political and societal oppression of women who have a voice, since they appear to bring into question the fragile male identity" (8) (Sharma and Tyagi, 2022:62). *Dopdi*, the modern reincarnation of Draupadi chooses to break free from the shackles of injustice and discrimination by refusing to be clothed after she's brutally raped by her enemies, Vyasa's *Draupadi* breaks free from "the Other" and chooses to express her desire for revenge and justice instead of suffering in silence.

Draupadi implements the feminist theory of subversion; the act of undermining patriarchal institutions by refusing to acknowledge her humiliation and in turn also denying the Kauravas the satisfaction of violating her body. To subvert something is to take oppressive forces and turn them into something that challenges the oppressor. "Her resistance lies in subverting the whole construct of equating feminine honour and purity with an inviolate body" (Motswapong, 2017). She redefines herself and her identity by raising her voice against the oppressors for tormenting her. Because Draupadi's husbands ignored her plea in the time of injustice, she turned to Krishna. By calling Krishna to intervene, Draupadi exercises what could be called the war of justice (9) (Motswapong, 2017). Her core strength and mental fortitude are anchored in her vow to not comb her hair until she has covered it with Dushasana's blood. Her vow is a testament of not only power but also of a woman filled with wrath and defiance. Even in the face of such an atrocity, Draupadi emerges victorious because "she has her own will, her own determination, her own capacity, and most of all her own existence" (10) (Chaudhary, 2014:20).

### III DECONSTRUCTING DRAUPADI: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch*, published in 1967 is a renowned work in literary analysis. *Yuganta* explores the characters and events in the *Mahabharata* through a critical and humanistic lens. Karve delves deep into the nuances and complexities of characters from the epic, urging readers to look past their preconceived notions of their beloved characters and gauge a deeper understanding of their flaws and mistakes.

In *Yuganta*, Karve describes Draupadi as a "lady pundit" for arguing in a courtroom filled with Kshatriya men and contends "...that she should only have cried out for decency and pity in the name of the Kshatriya code" (11) (Karve, 1967). Karve is of the opinion that Draupadi, in her plight, should have resorted to crying for help instead of questioning those in power. This reiterates the belief that a woman has to rely on men to save her from humiliation and should she dare to speak, she will have to face the repercussions of her defiance. In this instance, the *Mahabharata* for which Draupadi is deemed at fault.

Draupadi understood the social hierarchy and recognised that as a woman she had little to no authority over the patriarchal regulations that governed her identity. However, she uses the boons granted to her by Dhritarashtra to restore her husbands' dignity and in turn restoring her social position. She is indeed a lady pundit, capable of not only distinguishing but also establishing right apart from wrong. Although, on the surface it seems as though she caused the war but just like Helen of Homer's *The Iliad*, she is a victim of social expectations and men's egos. Yet, she is able to raise doubt and shame in the minds and hearts of her social superiors (patriarchal authority and elders) and plays the role of a lady pundit, dauntless and sagacious, instead of a damsel in distress. (12) (Khaitan, 2015)

Draupadi succeeds in not only detaching herself from the master-slave relationship but also posits a dilemma in the minds of the elders in the court. Draupadi's rebellion against societal norms exemplifies her spirit of resistance against injustice. Draupadi's question echoes in the eras of the nobility in the assembly. Her words are not just a plea of a humiliated and helpless woman, but also a challenge to the knowledge of right and wrong of the kings. It was a step unimaginable for a woman of her time and setting. Draupadi's question is not an antiquated question of a wronged virtuous woman whose integrity has been put on stake. (13) (Mondal D.)

### CONCLUSION

Draupadi, is no doubt a feminist figure for her impressive and courageous acts of defiance against the male hegemony. But her criticism of the status quo, demand for justice and establishment of a space where the marginalized can question authoritative figures also gives her the title of a feminist philosopher. Although it is the men who fight wars in the *Mahabharata*, it is the woman who ultimately decides the fate of these men; she is the one in control. Draupadi is that woman who through her resilience and courage becomes a threat to men.

Since the beginning of time, a woman's silence has been used as a tool by men to oppress them. However, Draupadi through her refusal to suffer in silence denies her oppressors the opportunity to force her into subjugation. Draupadi acquired strength in herself in the face of humiliation, agony, sorrow, and abuse at the hands of merciless men in a male-dominated androcentric society. It is this tenacity and bravery that elevates Draupadi to the status of a symbol of gender equality and resistance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Biraj Mehta, for her invaluable support, insights and guidance throughout the process of writing my research essay. However all faults in essay are purely mine.

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About the contributor:

Ms. Jessica Joseph is a Second Year Bachelor of Arts (SYBA) student from Wilson College (Autonomous), where she is studying Philosophy, Psychology and English Literature. She has immense interest in fields such as Psychology, Feminist Studies, Mythology, History and Music. She has been awarded the first prize for the above philosophical research essay titled "Constructing Draupadi's Philosophy of Justice" in a seminar themed "Acknowledging Women in Philosophy - An Enquiry into your favourite Woman Philosopher," organised by Bhavan's College (Andheri). She's an aspiring psychologist, motivated by her empathetic nature and active listening skills.

