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The scene of Draupadi's disrobing: context and meaning

Abstract

The scene of Draupadi's disrobing in the *Mahabharata* is considered to be one of the most important high points of the text and also a culminating point in the narrative that triggers off the rest of the incidents in the epic. This article attempts to make an in-depth textual study of the various connotations of the scene within the context of the larger narrative of the *Mahabharata* and the various intellectual cum theoretical underpinnings of the debate surrounding the scene of disrobing. This scene, despite being rooted within a particular narrative sequence, carries significant connotations for the general understanding of the way in which patriarchy denies power and agency to women.

Keywords: Disrobing, Draupadi, Mahabharata, patriarchy, body.

The text of the *Mahabharata* needs no introduction at least for the average Indian reader/audience since it has become a part of our cultural memory and has been adapted across a range of creative and literary genres. The story of the internecine conflict that takes place between the two branches of the same family leads to the ultimate war that ends in the destruction of both sides. The greatness of the epic lies not only in its length but also in its narrative technique and plot where several strands seem to be running simultaneously with several digressions and yet holding on to the main story. Characters, both male and female

contribute significantly to the development of the narrative and some of them have become etched in our memories. One such character is the heroine of the epic Draupadi, who has drawn a lot of attention from readers and critics alike due to the unconventionality of her nature and her outspokenness. Several incidents associated with her life attest to her non-conformity such as her birth from the sacrificial altar, her dark skin, her marriage to five men and most significantly her disrobing in the assembly hall during the dice match. The disrobing of Draupadi is one of the most shocking incidents that is a direct onslaught on her dignity as a woman and also an indirect attack on the men who are supposed to be her protectors.

In order to understand the larger implication of the scene, one needs to examine it closely from the textual point of view. After having lost everything, including himself, Yudhishtira stakes Draupadi, who is the common wife of the Pandavas, in the dice match and he loses her. As soon as the stake (interestingly a living human being gets equated with non-living objects which points to their dehumanization and commodification), the Kauravs scream out in joy and Duryodhana commands:

All right, you Steward, bring Draupadi,
 The beloved wife whom the Pandavas honor,
 Let her sweep the house and run on our errands—
 What a joy to watch!—with the serving wenches! (The Mahabharata 138)

The first reaction of Duryodhana is to bring her into the assembly in the capacity of a slave woman who will be at the disposal of his commands. A slave woman, apart from fulfilling other duties could also be asked to provide sexual services and the later speeches of Duryodhana are not free of sexual innuendoes. With one stroke of the dice, the queen of Indraprastha is reduced to the status of a slave—a *dasi*. The winning of the woman here

involves not only a material victory but also a victory that allows the victorious, who in this case are men, access to the body of the woman.

Duryodhana then orders the usher to bring Draupadi to the hall. On being summoned by the messenger, Draupadi sends him back with the question: “ ‘Then go to the game and, son of a bard, ask in the assembly, “Bharata, whom did you lose first, yourself or me?’ ” (Van Buitenen 140)

This question is particularly relevant at this juncture since it involves the question of ownership. Unlike a typical servant or *dasi* she refuses to heed to her so called master’s command and in doing so very categorically refuses to accept her status as a slave woman. Women, and more so slave women, hardly had any right to speak, let alone question the male authority. By putting forward such a pertinent question, Draupadi is asserting her identity as a speaking subject who has a mind and a voice of her own. Her question revolves around a series of interrelated issues as Alf Hiltebeitel suggests:

...Draupadi’s question is a philosophical one about the nature of self, compounded by legal issues of *mastery, lordship, property, ownership*, and slavery in the hierarchical context of marriage, and symbolized around the figure of the ultimate lord, master, and owner, the king, in relation to a subjecthood and objecthood of the queen, his wife. (Hiltebeitel 163)

Her question delays her entry into the hall but it does not prevent it. When the messenger dallies to go back to Draupadi fearing her wrath, Duryodhana commands his brother Duhshashana, who violently grabs Draupadi by her hair and drags her into the hall. The hair pulling of Draupadi acts as a precursor to her disrobing later in the scene. When she is pulled thus, she screams out in protest against the atrocity of the deed pleading that she is in her menses and therefore clad in a single garment and thus is not fit to appear in public view. The scriptural injunction against menstruating women prohibited them from appearing

in public and prescribed seclusion till the completion of the menstrual period. Although a misogynist ideology informs such a prohibition, Draupadi resorts to it at this moment of crisis since all other avenues of seeking protection have become inoperative. Her husbands and the king himself fail in their duties as the protector and the epic narrator very tellingly describes her status as “unprotected amidst her protectors” (Van Buitenen141). The very laws which have been drawn up by patriarchy to establish control over their bodies and sexuality are being quoted by Draupadi in a very intelligent and strategic negotiation of the patriarchal discourse. The scriptural discourse surrounding women which seeks to disempower them is being subverted by Draupadi in an attempt to salvage herself.

The only refuge that Draupadi has at this point of time is the weapon of words. She challenges the very body of knowledge which is supposed to offer her protection. Appealing to the learned and the elder men (no woman is present in the hall) who are present in the hall, she insists that her question regarding Yudhishtira’s legal right to stake her be examined and answered properly. As long as the debate surrounding her revolves around the realm of the verbal, she is safe. She knows it very well that as long as she maintains or rather holds on to her status as a speaking subject she will not fall a victim to the worst intentions of the Kauravas which is to reduce her to a menial. Her question, however, remains unanswered with even erudite men such as Bhishma failing to answer it.

Dismissing her challenge to the legality of the act of staking her, Karna, in an attempt to reduce her to the status of the mere body attacks by calling her a whore:

The Gods have laid down that a woman shall have one husband, scion of Kuru. She submits to many men and assuredly is a whore! Thus there is, I think, nothing strange about taking her into the hall, or to have her in one piece of clothing, or for that matter naked! She, the Pandavas wealth, and the Pandavas themselves have all been won by Saubala here according to the Law. (Van Buitenen146)

The regulatory attitude towards women aims at controlling their bodies and patriarchy subsists on the appropriation of their sexuality for the purpose of procreation and progress of the patrilineal line of succession. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage invites the malicious comments of Karna without however considering the fact that even the Pandavas are married to more than one woman. The multiple marriages of the Pandavas do not however invite any moral censure simply because they are men and are entitled to enjoy the company of multiple women without endangering their moral integrity within the patriarchal social set up. The epic society allows much greater freedom and agency to men in the choice of their sexual partners compared to women.

Karna then orders Duhsasana to disrobe Draupadi as though being married to five men gives them the license to publicly dishonor her and the fact that she has been reduced to the status of the slave woman gives them the authority to shame her thus. The act of disrobing is tantamount to an actual violation of her privacy as a female sexualized body. It amounts to a very gross transgression which is nothing short of rape. Janaky examines the scene of disrobing in these terms:

The *vastraharana* or the sequence of disrobing acquires this horror and magnitude only in the contemporary readings of the epic. Within the narrative Draupadi is never portrayed as mentioning this as her source of shame. On the contrary it is her forced entry into the *sabha* or the public space of the epic/social text that confirms her 'slave' status and ignominy. It is the barrier between the public and the private which defines the 'respectable' and the non-respectable woman. Draupadi is violated in a state of ritual pollution, the areas of pollution/purification as defined by the patriarchal ethos. Her entry into the public space is construed as a fall in the *Kuladharmā*. Another text lies hidden beneath these lines, i.e., she has to be located once again in the margins of the narrative by which the restoration of *Dharma* is

defined. Disrupting the seclusion of the menstrual cycle, the private language of the female body, she is dragged into the public male linguistic space of the sabha or the court-and that is 'Adharmah'. (Janaky 1999)

The male domain is traditionally constructed as the domain of language/culture and the female domain is the domain of the body/nature. As mentioned earlier, as long as Draupadi remains vocal she can avoid getting reduced to the essentialist identity of the body. In other words her question constructs her as a speaking voice. On the other hand her menstruating state is a stark reminder of her physicality and establishes her femaleness in no uncertain terms. The male assembly on the other hand embodies the domain of culture. Draupadi offers a curious example of the combination of both nature and culture (i.e. the body and the voice)—a combination that is considered to be rare and defies the stereotypical identification of the woman with merely the body. Draupadi becomes a tough case for patriarchy since it fails to deal with someone who has a female body but who also lays claim to a mind and voice of her own. The only way in which patriarchy can tackle a woman is to reduce her to the mere bodily and this is exactly what happens in the disrobing scene. The voyeuristic male gaze constructs the woman as the object to be gazed at thereby dehumanizing her and robbing her of her individuality. Laura Mulvey's now classic text makes a detailed theoretical study of the concept and theory of gaze. She observes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey 837)

It is this “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” to which the heroine of the *Mahabharata* gets reduced before she can be salvaged by the miraculous occurrence of an endless supply of garments which prevents her from being rendered absolutely naked. The entire assembly comprises an all male audience and their collective gaze turns Draupadi to an object to be looked at. Draupadi continuously resists this patriarchal attempt at objectification through her questioning voice.

The place that is accorded to the woman within the patriarchal discourse is often that of silence. Luce Irigaray, in her book *Speculum of the Other Woman* argues that women are denied subjectivity within the patriarchal set-up and patriarchy thrives on this denial. She says:

Subjectivity denied to woman: indisputably this provides the financial backing for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire. Once imagine that woman imagines and the object loses its fixed, obsessional character. As a bench mark that is ultimately more crucial than the subject, for he can sustain himself only by bouncing back off some objectiveness, some objective. If there is no more "earth" to press down/repress, to work, to represent, but also and always to desire (for one's own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know herself, then what pedestal remains for the ex-sistence of "subject"? (Irigaray 133)

This is true for all women in general. What happens to Draupadi in the disrobing scene is just another enactment of patriarchy’s attempt to deny subjectivity to the woman. Draupadi stands out as an exceptional figure because unlike the stereotypical association of a strong femininity with an assertive voice, she continues to be a victim of patriarchal oppression. Her challenge to the male authority in the assembly hall fails to translate into an actual operation of power and she keeps clamouring for revenge ever since.

Draupadi's ordeal continues to remain a very powerful symbol of the victimhood of women in general under the unequal laws of patriarchy.

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