

A Critical Study of Draupadi in Disguise in Context to Power Dynamics

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Abstract: Intention and purpose shape an individual's actions and their results. Social, political, and some personal reasons compel people to disguise their identity. A disguised person begins living in a new form by adopting the respective occupation, name, or fake identity. However, the masked identity could be a temporary solution to problems because it is extremely difficult to hide one's true identity. True identity reflects one's principles, ethics, and dispositions. Indian mythology narrates a plethora of cases where Hindu deities or men metamorphose their real identities to serve their purpose. The Mahabharata-the Indian epic also records some such incidents when its characters are bound to act in disguise. However, their intention and purpose justify their actions. Nevertheless, hiding their true identity puts them in a vulnerable position. In VirataParva, we see the five Pandavas along with their common wife Draupadi spend one year at Matsya Kingdom in disguise due to their political tussle with their cousins Kauravas. They adopted different forms and occupations. Draupadi's disguised identity caused her to work as a maid to the queen of the kingdom. This raises certain questions: By adopting the role, did she face any difficulty as a woman of low rank? How did she deal with the new circumstances? This paper aims to study Draupadi's character in a new light to the specific narrative in disguise.

Keywords: Disguise, Identity, Mythology, Intention, Circumstances

1. Introduction

The Mahabharata, one of the great Indian epics, is considered a kind of record book assimilating and documenting human behavior- temperaments and understanding. It touches upon subtle relationship-based dynamicssignificantly. It also depicts the virtues and vices of human life subtly- through various narratives and characters- such as love, care, honesty, loyalty, deception enmity, hatred, repentance, and many more. We believe that virtues bring prosperity and good fortune to humans. A virtuous man is considered trustworthy, honest, and reliable. Sometimes circumstances compel a man to disguise his true identity for his survival. The Mahabharata documents a similar incident in Pandavas' lives when they hid themselves in different forms to complete their last one-year exile undetected. It was one of the most difficult tasks of their lives that forced them to mask different faces.

Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas lost the game of dice a second time against Kauravas. The game commenced with the condition that whosoever the party would lose the game had to submissively accept a thirteen years' exile including the last year ought to be unidentified. If failed in the condition they had to start the exile afresh with the same rules.The condition brought rigorous testing for them. After completing twelve years in the wilderness they planned to move to the Matsya Kingdom by changing their social identities. First, theyponder over their strengths and weaknesses to identify their personality traits to accomplish their mission. They laid their strategy cautiously and assumed their roles accordingly. This thoughtful move prepared them to justify their roles incognito. Thus, they decided their occupation in accord with their nature and intereststo appear in the court of King Virata. Yudhishtira took up the role of a Brahmana named, Kanka, who was good at dice

games because the king was fond of the game. Bhimasen disguised himself in a cook's form (named Vallabha), Arjuna as Eunuch (named Brihannala), Nakula horse keeper (named Granthika), and Sachdeva as kinerearer (Tantripal). Draupadi chose to present herself as Sarindhari in the palace of Sudeshna. As per their strategy, one by one they entered the court in different forms and manners. Eventually, all of them obtained their desirous jobs for themselves.

2. Draupadi as Sairindhri: A Maid in Disguise

The Mahabharata describes Draupadi as an exquisite and remarkable beauty. When she began her job as Sarindhari to Sudeshna in her palace her marvellous figure alarmed Sudeshna. She was anxious about losing her husband to her. It is evident from Draupadi's complaint to Bhima, that she divulged to him: ". . . O Bhima, Kaikeyi, jealous of my beauty, always pains me by her endeavors to prevent the king from taking a fancy to me . . ." (Kichaka-BadhaParva, Sec. 21).

The narrative reveals that Sairindhri, the virtuous maid in her disguised identity was the talk among women. Once Kichaka, the Commander of Virata's forces, saw Sairindhri in his sister's (Sudeshna) chamber. Mesmerized of her beauty he was unable to deviate his thoughts from her. Kichaka proposed to Draupadi. He wanted her to accept his marriage proposal. He tried to allure her with all sorts of luxuries that he could provide her. Overpowered by his lustful thoughts, he asked her to have a sexual union with him. He wanted her to gratify his senses and grab great favour from her.

Namita Sethi in her research paper titled, "Representing Issues of Lineage, Caste, and Gender Politics in the Mahabharata: Texts, Teaching, and Television Adaptations", observes caste, class, and gender-based individual identities and their position in society. She notices the role of Draupadi as the representation of the undignified status of serving women class. For her, gender disparity is clearly noticeable in the epic. Draupadi being a woman was doubly vulnerable. Firstly, as a maid, she had no identity except as a beautician to the queen and secondly, she was a woman of irresistible beauty. Sethi writes:

Draupadi as Malini the sairindhri oversees hairdressing and other grooming essentials for Sudeshna the Queen. As the queen's chambermaid, she ironically plays the role of a *dasi* that she so resisted in the dicing scene. Her attempted molestation and manhandling by Kichaka is also similar to the humiliation Draupadi had faced in the Assembly Hall. By making us feel sorry for Draupadi in each instance, the text foregrounds the vulnerability of serving women. (27)

Sairindhri, a devoted wife to her husbands rejected his proposal she made him aware of her marriage to five powerful Gandharvas. She also advised him not to follow the immoral path of having an eye on another's wife. Kichaka, the wicked soul person did not pay heed to her words. She reprimanded him: "Do not, O son of a Suta, act so foolishly and do not throw away thy life. Know that I am protected by my five husbands. Thou canst not have me. I have Gandharvas for my Husbands." (Ganguli, Kichaka-BadhaParva, Sec. 14). Her scornful voice reflects her challenging position in the court. She encountered the male gaze of perceiving her body as an object of gratification several times. We observe Draupadi a symbolic figure that indicates the oppressed position of the marginalized section.

Draupadi's resistance to Kichaka's unethical demand made him seek Sudeshna's assistance. He asked her to favour him to obtain her maid. Initially, Sudeshna was reluctant to his appeal, however, his persistent entreaty melted her heart. She plotted to send Sairindhri to him on the pretext of fetching fresh wine from his palace. She instructed him to prepare accordingly for the meeting. Kichaka having planned with his sister set to execute his plan and accordingly, he ordered his servants to prepare fresh wine. The following discourse reflect the evil design of both unholy souls:

Do thou, on the occasion of some festival, procure viands and wines for me. I shall then send my Sairindhri to thee on the pretence of bringing wine. And when she will repair thither do thou in solitude, free from interruption, humour her as thou likest. Thus soothed, she may incline her mind to thee. (Kichaka-BadhaParva, Sec.15)

Subsequently, at the appropriate time, she commanded Sairidhri to fetch the liquor for her from the designated place. Sairidhri aware of Kichaka's intention reluctantly went to his palace. Observing the favourable opportunity he proposed to her again. However, Draupadi's constant rejection appalled him and he began humiliating her. He tried to overpower her. Meanwhile, Sairidhri pushed him and rushed towards the court for protection. Kichaka chased her and seized her. He pulled her hair and kicked her to the ground. He humiliated her publicly. Kanka (Yudhishtira) and Bhimasen (Vallabha) witnessed the scene. Bhima burning with anger was about to react but Yudhishtira pressed him to bear the moment. For him, it was important to maintain their false identity.

Later, at night Draupadi visited Bhima in his room. She narrated all the suffering and pains she went through during her stay at the palace. She was a woman of a self-esteem and existence. She threatened Kichaka for his advancement on her with his killing by her Gandharava husbands. Intending to take revenge upon Kichaka for her honour, she related Bhima's evil desire. She did not want to face Kichaka again. His obsession with her beauty tormented her inner peace. Therefore, she urged Bhima to kill him for her self-respect. Bhima first tried to pacify her grieving mind, however, he agreed to her demand to avenge her honour. He instructed her to allure Kichaka to appear at the designated place by manipulating her words of having a physical union with him (Kichaka). Draupadi executed her task efficiently and at night Kichaka appeared at the decided place where Bhima was already present. They had a fierce duel, and eventually, Kichaka was killed. Thus Sairidhri attained peace of mind. Following the incident, Kichaka's relatives and supporters tried to harm her by burning her alive with Kichaka's dead body but Bhima saved her.

The episode highlights Draupadi's psyche in odd circumstances. Her self-affirmed identity was highly challenged in the court of King Virata. She sacrificed her dignity by becoming a maid to Sudeshna for her husbands' political purpose only. V. Vaidya in his book *The Mahabharata: A Criticism* remarks, "The queen of the Pandavas, was the most difficult to be disguised strong in her virtue and possessed of courage, she dressed herself as a Sairidhri or a servant girl . . ." (142)

Draupadi's pathetic condition shows a sharp fall from a queen to a servant. The most powerful woman married to five great princes of Hastinapur lost her worth during her incognito stay in Virata's kingdom. She worked hard and suffered silently. However, she could not bear her insult and humiliation by Kichaka in the court. She found herself as a victim of men's lustful desire. For her, it was difficult to bear insult in Virata's court. She expressed her intolerable emotions: "Oh, the five Gandharvas who are my husbands and who see me thus treated, will they too keep silent? Heavens this is life which I cannot bear" (Vaidya, 143). She resolved to avenge the wrongs done to her. She was a fierce woman who could not compromise her individuality.

She was aware of her beauty and power as a woman. As a wife, she applied her charm and power to obtain her husband Bhima's favour to teach a lesson to Kichaka. She provoked him by showcasing her hardship experienced in the form of Sairidhri. She showed him her hands with marks of corns reflecting her lowly status. She delineated Kichaka's misbehaviour and even criticized Yudhishtira for his gambling addiction that brought them all to such a miserable condition. She counted each one of her husbands' sorrows and their unworthy position in the palace. She narrated the tale of her first encounter with Kichaka, who later tried to seduce her in his chamber. She told him how Kichaka kicked her to the ground and humiliated her in the presence of Yudhishtira and Bhima himself, however, disguised. She narrated Sudeshna's deception by sending her to Kichaka's palace. She reflected on her helplessness at the moment she did not deserve at all. She was a faultless virtuous woman yet she suffered. She complained about Yudhishtira's passive nature. She disapproved of his dealing in those circumstances improperly.

3. Draupadi in Modern Rendition

It is noteworthy that Sudeshna deceived her, and Kichaka found the opportunity to exploit her but lost. She was a woman of indomitable courage. She protested his advances on her and saved her honour. She showed her rare presence of mind and strong decision-making power. As Archana Singh and Harleen Kaur write in their paper titled "Draupadi, the Unsung Heroine of Classical Epoch" about Bimal Krishna Matilal comments on her unconventional reaction: "Draupadi had presence of mind and fearlessness even during calamities. She could

rebuke and threaten the Kauravas, Jayadratha, and Kicaka for molesting her and was bold enough to argue with the members of the assemblies of the Kurus and also Virata”.

Further, they appreciate Draupadi’s modern approach to handling the problems uncompromisingly in the contemporary society where women are sought as men’s property. Draupadi’s virtuous disposition, her fearlessness, her debating skill, and her indomitable spirit of not bowing down against injustice differentiate her from conventional women. Kichaka represents the immoral men’s mindset who misuse their power to oppress women. “Draupadi’s different and uncompromising approach differentiates her from others. She had a modern approach to handling issues in the era where women were considered to be merely property owned by men.” (Archana and Harleen)

MeenaKelkar in her book *Subordination of Woman: A New Perspective*, depicts Draupadi’s character through folk tradition rendition as an ideal image of not her conventional role but her independent revolting nature. “She could never act like a lifeless inanimate object and yield to any form of justice” (Kelkar, 63). Further, Kelkar reveals Draupadi’s true identity as a woman. She eulogizes Draupadi: “The status and dignity of woman was important for her. She not only fought for her personal rights but for the dignity of womanhood” (64)

It is evident through the epic reading that Draupadi endured the pain which was not the result of her own faults but her husband’s. Her grief was the grief of women who become victims of men’s lust. They generally perceive women as an object to use. Their beauty and bodies are the things that they want to possess. Devdutt Patnaik’s comments posted at an online site under the title “#MeToo in Mahabharata: Political needs were placed over Draupadi’s security” raises concern about women workers in royal courts where women in general were abused or assaulted by men or women in power. He shows sympathy for Draupadi for being harassed in Virata’s court not as a queen but as a worker. He remarks:

But, perhaps the worst in store is for Draupadi who becomes the hairdresser to Virat’s queen and has to suffer the unwanted attentions of the king’s brother-in-law, Khichaka. He wants to have sexual relations with her and propositions her, and refuses to accept her no as an answer. In fact, the queen encourages Draupadi to take wine into Khichaka’s room, clearly putting her in a vulnerable position. Draupadi runs to the king’s court seeking protection, but there in public she is physically assaulted by Khichaka and no one comes to her rescue, neither the king nor her husbands who are in disguise. (Patnaik)

He finds the modern campaign #metoo relevant in that time of epic. He writes: “The story, an interlude in the otherwise royal saga, draws attention to how staff, especially female staff, are treated in organizations by people in positions of power. People who are supposed to protect them end up as their abusers.”

We notice many such horrible incidents around us wherein women experience humiliation in the workplace. They are harassed and exploited physically, emotionally, and mentally by their male colleagues. Consequently, such unwanted actions bring about behaviour changes in the personality of the victims. In an article titled “Humiliation at Work”, Catherine Fisk comments: “Humiliation is an emotion that is usually interpersonal rather than wholly internal to the person, ‘Humiliations tends to be a triadic affair, requiring one who humiliates, one who is humiliated, and one witness (or more) whose good opinion is important to the one humiliated.’ . . . Humiliation typically occurs in relationships of unequal power where the humiliator has power over the victim. . . .” (77)

We see in the case of Draupadi that she went through mental trauma due to Kichaka’s inappropriate behaviour and demands. Her persistent refusal was ignored by both Sudeshna and her brother. Catherine rightly points out the “triadic affair” of humiliation, as we see Draupadi’s humiliation was witnessed by people including her husbands assembled in the Virata court. Moreover, Kichaka is the humiliator and Draupadi is the humiliated one. The intensity of emotional pain was so high that she could not resist herself to take vengeance on Kichaka through Bhima.

Puttnaik observes the impact of power dynamics on relationships. He writes about how political matters change the relationship dynamics among socially constructed structures. He points out Yudhishtira’s response to Sarindhari while she appeals for justice. Yudhishtira replied to her in code words that she would receive justice

as soon as they were released from the incognito, a political condition. He overlooked her suffering and requested her to maintain silence. He wanted her to cooperate with them in their mission. Pattnaik writes that Yudhishtira ignored Draupadi's disgrace over his political gain. He preferred his political motive to her security. The epic records his words in the following statement:

O Sairindhri, thou art ignorant of the timeliness of things, and it is for this that thou weepest as an actress, besides interrupting the play of dice in Matsya's court. Retire, O Sairindhri; the Gandharvas will do what is agreeable to thee. And they will surely display thy woe and take the life of him that hath wronged thee. (Kichaka-BadhaParva, Sec. 16)

Here, we see Draupadi as a victim at various levels. Firstly, as a wife, she had to maintain her virtue and sincerity in an alien land. Secondly, she had to protect herself from evil-minded men like Kichaka, and thirdly, as a Sairindhri she had to perform duties for the queen, though she was herself a queen. Finally, to maintain her disguised identity, she had to shed her true self which was a challenging job for her. She was efficiently discharging her duties as a Sairidhari, but Kichaka's lecherous behaviour was intolerable to her. She could not mask her true disposition in her molestation case. She raised her voice in the court, but Yudhishtira tried to suppress her because of political ambition. Notably, the power dynamics tore Draupadi inwardly, however, she rose like a phoenix with more vigour and fierce spirit.

4. Sudeshna: An Unnoticed Danger in Disguise

Sudeshna, the queen of the Matsya kingdom, played a significant role in Sairindhri's (Draupadi) molestation. She first agreed to her brother's request to assist him in winning Sairindhri. She gave him the idea to prepare fresh wine for a festival so that she could order her maid to fetch the same for her. Initially, Sairidhari refused to obey her. Subsequently, Sudeshna used her weapon of power on Draupadi to subjugate her. Although Sudeshna was aware of Kichaka's ill intentions. She, being a woman, could have averted the situation. By aiding her brother, she played the role of a predator. Here, the point comes to be underscored that power dynamics influence the acts of a person irrespective of gender identity. Sudeshna's deception caused Draupadi to pay a heavy amount of her dignity. It was Sudeshna who should be blamed for Draupadi's grief in Virata's court. Sudeshna acknowledged her brother's advances and supported him in molesting a woman. Draupadi knew the situation may befall her if she exposed her beauty to men in the court. Therefore, she chose to clad her face to the male gaze. Yudhishtira's warning before arriving in Matsya kingdom to Draupadi about men's nature was indicative of expecting such encounters. He warned her: "Do thou, therefore, conduct thyself in such a way that sinful men of evil hearts may not be gladdened by gazing at thee" (Pandava-PraveshaParva, Sec. 3). Draupadi felt deceived by Yudhishtira because of his indulgence in the game of dice on the court. She mainly accused him of putting her in that unruly condition.

We learn about women's problems at work in real life. Indeed, it is a serious problem that needs contemplative measures to deal with. In recent times, after reviewing gynocentric issues related to harassment in the workplace, the Government of India brought an act for them to provide them with a secure atmosphere to work. It prioritizes a conducive and fearless environment at work and empowers them to work with dignity. It enumerates situations and incidents that are categorized as harassment at work. The provisions have been made to take appropriate actions against the humiliators. *The Handbook on Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace* by the Government of India provides comprehensive information on the pertaining situations. It identifies the situations that create a hostile environment to work for women. It notes a case that can be seen as relevant to Draupadi's case in the Mahabharata.

The case is as follows:

Sumedha is a Captain with the Indian Army. She has refused an offer made by a Senior Officer for a relationship. Sumedha has kept quiet about this experience, . . . Now she is being subjected to repeated advances by three of her senior officer colleagues. When she turns around and protests, she is singled out for additional physical training. . . In the above example, Sumedha's refusal to the sexual advances of her Senior Officer, leads to her being subjected to rumours, gossip, character assassination, unwelcome sexual advances by other officers, and arbitrary disciplinary action. (16)

Although Draupadi is not a woman who exists in the present time, however, she metaphorically still exists in every woman in any society. Her working at Virata's court as a maid and her harassment provoke human minds to take the case for psychological interpretations.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the intensive reading of the Kichaka episode highlights Draupadi's struggle as a woman of low rank in the palace of Virata King. She encountered the treacherous and ugly facade of power and political structure where women are served as an object. They are deceived and manipulated according to the needs and desires of influential people. Sudeshna and her brother epitomized the evil-spirit people who try to exploit their subordinates under their position of power. Devdutt Patnaik, MeenaKelkar, and other scholars raise serious issues of gender disparity and politics. In the position of Sairindhri, she was humiliated and subjugated against male desire. Since she was a woman of courage and substance, she subverted the situation on her own accord.

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