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**Is Draupadi Sita's other?
A study of Irawati Karve's Yuganta and Mahashweta Devi's Draupadi**

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Abstract

The image of Draupadi is the preoccupation of many twentieth and twenty-first century writers. She is projected as one of the most problematic figures in the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata unlike Sita who is presented as an ideal woman and thereby the most celebrated figure in Hindu religion. Many works like Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni, Soali Mitra's Nathavati Anathvat, Kanhailal's production Draupadi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Palace of Illusions are based on Draupadi's character.

The focus of this article is the changing representations of Draupadi in Irawati Karve's Yuganta and Mahashweta Devi's 'Draupadi'. Irawati Karve in her book Yuganta presents a fascinating comparison between Draupadi and Sita, heroines of two great epics Mahabharata and Ramayana respectively. Both the heroines were "wed in swayamvara, and each was given to a man who proved himself the best archer of his time". (Karve p.79). Swayamvara, swayam means self and vara means choice or desire, it is a practise in which girls of marriageable age chooses a husband (at least it was a practise in royal families). And Mahashweta Devi recreates the character of Draupadi/ Dopdi in a different light. As against the character of Sita, Draupadi's character provides a wide range of interpretations.

Introduction

The image of Draupadi has preoccupied the minds of many twentieth and twenty-first century writers. She is projected as one of the most problematic and revered figures in the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* unlike Sita who is presented as an ideal woman and thereby the most celebrated figure in Hindu religion. Sita, the heroine of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, has become an epitome of purity, piousness and devotion, whereas the actions of Draupadi has raised many vital questions about *Dharma, purity, resistance etc.* Works like Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1984), Soali Mitra's *Nathvati Anathvat* (1983), Kanhailal's production *Draupadi* (2000), Irawati Karve's *Yuganta* (1969), Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi' (1997) and many other oral narratives and works in different languages have attempted to engage with different debates that have risen from the character of Draupadi. The scope of her character has provided space for the writers to provide their insight into larger political questions like the Naxalbari movement in West Bengal and insurgency in North-East India. This article will focus on the changing representations of Draupadi with reference to Irawati Karve's *Yuganta* and Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*.

According to Stuart Hall, "The correlations between these levels-the material, the conceptual and the signifying-are governed by our cultural and linguistic codes and it is this set of interconnections which produces meaning." (35) It is the language (which carries all kinds of representation) that produces meaning and this language which is produced and controlled by the writers resulting in a certain type of image production. The term representation has a range of meanings and interpretations. It does not simply mean depicting things the way they are but it means re-presenting or constructing. Different meanings are attributed to things/people the way they are constructed or represented. Devdutt Pattanaik in his article on "Sita versus Draupadi" states that unlike Sita, Draupadi was created out of the feeling of vengeance and as a weapon to destroy the Kuru Dynasty that patronised Drona to train Kuru princes in weapon training¹. Draupadi unlike Sita was/is always represented as fierce and rebellious figures in multiple retellings of Draupadi's character.

¹ <https://devdutt.com/articles/sita-versus-draupadi/>. For more information please read.

Irawati Karve's *Yuganta*, studies the main characters of *Mahabharata* as historical figures and using their attitudes and behaviour she tries to gain an understanding of the times in which they lived. J. Dunham and P. Machwe observes that Irawati Karve makes many assumptions, which might be unacceptable to many and the very first assumption she makes is "that the conflict represented in the Mahabharata was historical, that it took place at a particular time..." (Dunham, 134), which probably made things little easier to understand. By placing the characters against the historical backdrop, she presents a fascinating comparison between Draupadi and Sita, the heroines of two great epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* respectively. By origins of birth, Draupadi and Sita were born out of distinctive elements, fire and the earth respectively, speaks a lot about their inherent nature, which also determined the course of their future lives.

Both the heroines were "wed in swayamvara, and each was given to a man who proved himself the best archer of his time". (Karve, 79). The word *Swayamvara* holds significance here as *swayam* means self and *vara* means choice or desire also groom in , it is a practice in which women of marriageable age choose a husband (at least in the royal families). Women were given choice in the ancient tradition like Rukmini² was abducted by Krishna when she expressed her desire to marry him; similarly, it was Gandhari³'s choice to marry Dhritrashtra, a forced one but none the less her choice, when Bhishma came with the marriage proposal and it was again her choice to become blindfolded for the rest of her life. In almost all the cases women practised their own choice, be it Subhadra⁴, Chitrangada⁵, Kunti⁶, Madri⁷, Ulupi⁸ or Hidimbi⁹. But Draupadi and Sita never got the chance to make choices of their own; they both were won by the best archers of their time,

² Iyer, S. (2021). Rukmini: Krishna's Wife. India: Rupa. This book provides an insight in the life of presence of Rukmini and her contribution in the rise of Dwarka.

³ Banerjee, A. (2019). The Curse of Gandhari. India: Bloomsbury Publishing. The author peeks into the life of Gandhari, a self-sacrificing daughter, wife and mother. It's a troubled history of Gandhari's existence.

⁴ Kohli, N. (2021). Subhadra. India: Vani Prakashan. The book only deals with the section of Mahabharata where the role of Subhadra was crucial to the larger plot.

⁵ <https://www.artisanscrest.in/blogs/artisan-of-the-month/the-story-of-arjuna-and-chitrangada>. Chitrangada was Arjuna's wife, this depicts the story of

⁶ Dasgupta, K. (2021). Kunti: The Sati Series II. India: Pan Macmillan. The Author depicts the life of Kunti where she is portrayed as a matriarch.

⁷ <https://www.indica.today/long-reads/madri-mahabharata-forgotten-mother-twins/>. Madri was Pandu's second wife and Nakul and Sahdev's mother, She also committed Sati.

⁸ <https://www.hindu-blog.com/2010/09/story-of-uloopi-and-arjuna-ulupi-naga.html>. The blog depicts the story of Arjuna and a Naga princess.

⁹ <https://www.womensweb.in/2020/08/why-is-hidimbi-not-respected-as-the-first-queen-of-the-pandavas-aug20wk3sr/>. Hidimbi was Bheema's wife and Ghatotkach's mother.

who fulfilled the conditions of the contest and were gifted like prizes by their fathers. Both of them were treated like prized possessions before and also after their marriages.

The marriage of Draupadi to all the five brothers was not her choice but still she was shared by all the five brothers as it was their mother's dictum. But be it the fact that Arjuna won Draupadi or some other reason, she was in love with him till the last breath of her life and she paid the price 'for loving Arjuna most'. (Karve, 102). She was the first one to fall on the way to *Swarga*. There was no one to help her except Bhima but he himself was not in the position to help. Though "Draupadi was the living symbol of the Pandavas' new position...she was the source of their unity and solidarity." (Karve, 84). Even then nobody except Bhima fulfilled their duties towards Draupadi.

Draupadi did not utter a single word until she lost her patience when Dharma or Yudhishtra staked her in the game of dice. Being outraged at the implication, she had asked the slave "Go into the assembly and ask if Dharmaraja had become a slave before he staked me." (Karve, 98).

"Draupadi's question was not only foolish, it was terrible" (Karve, 99) observes Irawati Karve. According to her "No matter what answer was given, her position was desperate". (Karve, 99). But the very fact that she showed courage to ask question in a court full of eminent men, she resisted giving up herself for Dharma's wish. She was resisting her husband's wishes which makes her different from Sita who never questioned her husband's unjust commands, for instance, Sita had to undergo *Agnipariksha* to prove her chastity and even after proving it she was asked to go on exile when she was pregnant. She never asked a question or resisted her husband's commands, instead she followed then blindly. The act of asking questions makes Draupadi a symbol of resistance. Alf Hildebeitel in his essay "Draupadi's question" calls it a 'woman's question' and also declares Draupadi a feminist, where she challenges the dictum of Manu describing women as 'non independent' (*asvatantra*) and asserting a female agency which was unimaginable otherwise.

Noteworthy here is a fact that even Sita resisted, she resisted Ravana's advances to protect her purity and in turn became an epitome of chastity, an ideal woman and as a result till date in Hindu religion, she is worshipped as a goddess. On the other hand Draupadi failed to create a space for herself majorly due to her non-conforming ideas. She

is one of the most challenging and individualistic figures in Hindu mythology. She is not worshipped as a deity, at least in dominant Hindu religion. She is the woman who asks questions, she is the one who leaves her hair loose to remind her husbands of their insult, she is the one who provokes her husbands to fight and take revenge on their own kin. There is hardly any discussion anywhere on Draupadi's chastity, making her a very complicated figure states Devdutt Pattanaik. The complexity within the character of Draupadi has grasped the authors' attention to portray her through different shades of narratives.

One such attempt is Mahasweta Devi's short story Draupadi, a powerful and rebellious short story. Mahasweta Devi is one of the very few writers who writes for the Adivasi people and narrate their stories to the world, she writes, so that she could bring some change to their lives. In the introduction to Agnigarbha¹⁰ (Womb of Fire) Mahasweta Devi writes "Life is not mathematics and the human being is not made for the sake of politics. I want a change in the present social system and do not believe in mere party politics." (4) She has devoted her life to raise her voice for the upliftment of the Adivasi people through her work.

In a similar vein, Draupadi is a story of Dopadi Mejhen who participated in Naxalbari movement along with her husband Dulna Majhi. Mahasweta Devi has deliberately used this name; as it is loaded with multiple meanings as well as controversial character. The connotations associated name are of *vastra-haran* or *chir-haran*, polyandry, upbraided hair, fierce and many more. The implications of such associations are so grave that till date parents don't name their daughters Draupadi¹¹, contrariwise the name Sita is quite common. Naming her heroines after mythical figure is a special technique used by Mahasweta Devi; she tries to recreate the mythological characters with different colours and different background and with a very clear class difference. She has successfully

¹⁰ Agnigarbha means womb of fire. It is collection of short stories in which Dopadi first appeared.

¹¹ <https://www.momspresso.com/parenting/rantings-of-a-sanein-mom/article/will-women-like-draupadi-ever-be-idolized#:~:text=People%20like%20to%20name%20their,many%20else%20but%20not%20Draupadi>. Provides a popular opinion about naming their daughters Draupadi.

recreated the character of Krishna's foster mother Yashoda in *Stanadayini* (Breast-Giver) also, here in this, it is the character of poverty stricken Jashoda¹².

Mahasweta Devi's heroine is an Adivasi woman. Both Dulna and Dopadi along with other revolutionaries stood against the merciless atrocities of the Sahukars. The story unfolds with the killing of Surja Sahu because he was not allowing these people ('Untouchables') to take water from his well. They were not allowed to have access to the basic necessities of life. Not just their basic needs the land owners also exploit the lower-class women. This is evident when Dopadi says that "his mouth watered when he looked at me. I'll pull out his eyes." (Devi,30) The condition of peasants was vulnerable during that time especially of the Adivasi women. Nandini Sen in her introduction to *Mahasweta Devi: Critical Perspectives* comments on the depleted condition of Adivasi women. If these women deny or tried to resist the upper-class men or sahuakar they were abducted and raped. These Adivasi women were fit to be their bed partners but not their life partners, when it comes to marriage all the morality, caste, class, religious preferences would step in but not when they were sexually exploited.

The police force, Senanayak and two from her own community were searching her. She knew very well, what will happen if they get hold of her but still, she moved out of the village in order to save other innocent people. In all these years she has learned how to come to terms with the torture, "Dopdi knows, has learned by hearing so often and so long, how one can come to terms with torture. If mind and body give way under torture, Dopdi will bite off her tongue. That boy did it. They countered him. When they counter you, your hands are tied behind you. All your bones are crushed; your sex is a terrible wound." (Devi, 28-29)

The similarities between both the heroines end at the very beginning of the comparison. Draupadi on one hand was the queen, had all material pleasures in life and "is infinitely clothed and cannot be publicly stripped...". (Spivak, 12) on the other hand Dopadi could not even afford to put kerosene oil on her scalp to get rid of lice, because "they (police) will follow the smell". She very well knew that if she'll be caught; there will be no one to

¹² Seth, S. (2019). Yashoda and Krishna. United Kingdom: Partridge Publishing India. Jashoda or Yashoda was Krishna's foster mother, who loved and nurtured him. For more information please see the above mentioned book.

save her. "As a tribal, Dopadi is not romanticized by Mahasweta Devi." (Spivak, 13)

Her story is no different from the horror stories of the other Adivasi women and the other rebels. Mahasweta Devi has portrayed it very realistically.

Dopadi faced a lot of humiliation in the form of multiple rapes, even then in the end section of the story she emerges as a symbol of resistance. She behaves like a lunatic according to the society. "Draupadi stands up. She pours the water on the ground and tears her piece of cloth with her teeth. Seeing such strange behaviour, the guard says, 'She's gone crazy,' and runs for orders. He can lead the prisoner out but doesn't know what to do if the prisoner behaves incomprehensibly. So he goes to ask his superior." (Devi, 36)

Dopadi's behaviour was incomprehensible for the guards and others also because it was something which they could not imagine, because here stands a woman who refuses to cover her body and assumed shame associated with it. She tore the cloth they gave her and when asked says:

...What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but

how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? .

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak's white bush

shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn't a man here that I should

be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you

do? Come on, counter me – come on, counter me – ?

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for

the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target,

terribly afraid. (Devi, 37)

Unlike Draupadi, no divine intervention helped Dopadi instead she was raped multiple times. She is no more afraid of the situation she is in, because they cannot harm her more than what they have already done thereby releasing her of all the fears to lose. Even if they kill her (encounter) she knew that she fought with dignity and will die with it. And that is why Senanayak is afraid of the "unarmed target" in the end.

Mahasweta Devi rewrites the character of Draupadi as a poverty stricken, lower class, lower caste, Adivasi women, who like her mythological counterpart emerges as a symbol of resistance. In a similar fashion the character of Draupadi is recreated/rewritten in different light by Soali Mitra and Pratibha Ray in *Nathvati Anathvat* and *Yajnaseni* respectively. There are many other texts in different languages which could also throw some light on the changing image of Draupadi.

In Indian mythologies and other religious text there are other women character, who emerge as a symbol of power and resistance like Kali¹³, Parvati¹⁴, Durga¹⁵ are to name a few. They all are the celebrated and worshipped as goddesses in dominant Hindu religion but not Draupadi. Even Sita is referred with glory as Sita Mata but not Draupadi. Draupadi was very much a goddess, she was born out of unnatural circumstances. She emerged out of fire “she was dark like the goddess Earth and an embodiment of Shri, the goddess of Prosperity” (Hilterbeitel, 113). But the word *Mata* or *Maa* is not associated with Draupadi. Although Draupadi along with Ahilya, Sita, Kunti and Mandodari is considered Panchkanya¹⁶, who are revered in Hindu mythological texts but Unlike Sita, Draupadi could never catch the popular sentiment of a goddess who could be prayed to.

Draupadi is one character which provides the scope of exploration and one could interpret it with different portrayals like Mahasweta Devi did, in her work “Draupadi”. It is till date one of the most debated characters from *Mahabharata*. Many twentieth century writers have tried to re-write the character of Draupadi in different works and mediums (films, TV, Theatre etc). The density, complexity and the controversial nature of the character of Draupadi provides space for the writer’s creative imagination, which in less possible when one deals with the character of Sita.

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¹³ Mookerjee, A. (1988). *Kali: The Feminine Force*. United Kingdom: Inner Traditions/Bear. Kali is a divine mother goddess and a symbol of power at the same time.

¹⁴ Banerjee, A. (2022). *Vow of Parvati*. India: Bloomsbury Publishing. An insight in the life of devi Parvati and her love life.

¹⁵ Chitgopekar, N. (2003). *The Book of Durga*. India: Viking/ Penguin. Durga is the most popular incarnation of Devi and one of the main forms of the Goddess Shakti in the Hindu pantheon.

¹⁶ <https://vedicfeed.com/panchakanya-five-pillars-of-chaste-feminine-divinity/>. For more information see this.

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