

## RE-FASHIONING THE MYTHICAL DRAUPADI: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SAOLI MITRA'S 'NATHABATI ANATHABAT'

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### **Abstract:**

'Whatever is here may be found elsewhere; what is not cannot be found anywhere else.' The prodigiousness of the *Mahabharata*, thus described pertinently has always enticed writers to base their works on it. This research paper deals with Saoli Mitra's re-presentation and reformation of the mythical character Draupadi and attempts to deconstruct the patriarchal discourse. This paper not only intends to illustrate Draupadi as an unsung heroine of the great Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, but also as an embodiment of resistance, who ultimately liberates herself from the predicaments of patriarchal order.

**Keywords:** Myth, Patriarchy, Oppression, Agony, Resistance, Protest.

The *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the two great epics, are an encyclopedic coverage of ancient Indian history. The *Mahabharata* is a fundamental text that explores the world of spiritual freedom, passion, duty, warfare, love and is a classic of perennial existence and significance. Its value is everlasting. Wendy Doniger, in the introduction, calls the *Mahabharata* an epic masterpiece of huge sweep and magisterial power which is hundred times more interesting than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The concept of '*dharma*' is the core concept of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The epic mainly deals with the re-establishment of *dharma*. Since two millennia, the *Mahabharata* has been instrumental in shaping the Indian psyche. Rustom Bharucha, an Indian cultural critic, observes on the role an epic plays in representing the culture of a nation:

The *Mahabharata* is not merely a great narrative poem; it is our *itihasa*, the fundamental source of knowledge of our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, stagecraft, sociology, economy, in short, our history in all its detail and density. (97)

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The great Indian epics – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are a profound influence in moulding and illuminating the Indian literary consciousness. Western philosopher, Joseph Campbell, opines:

Myths are stories of our search throughout the ages for truth, for meaning, for significance. The story of human suffering, striving, living- and youth coming to knowledge of itself, what it has to go through. (168)

Indian mythology is rife with images of women, who form an integral part of the society, true to the values of the times in which they occurred and were recorded. They have been the victims of oppression and several atrocities which can easily be discerned in the *Mahabharata*.

Indian drama and theatre were relatively a more public affair and hence a restricted platform for the females. Women were presented throughout history as iconic images of subjugation and perfection. Bharatmuni's *Natyashastra*, the first Indian treatise on dramaturgy, portrayed women as enclosing themselves. It indicates the repressed social status of women. In chapter twenty-one of his *Natyashastra*, Bharatmuni mentions about women's dance form 'lasya', which replete with shringar rasa. There were twelve variations of 'lasya', all of which were performed solely by women.

The entrance of the theatre proscenium was not shut for women. Kalidasa's famous play *Vikramorvashiyam*, a Sanskrit play of five-acts, gives a mythical account dramatized by all female casts in the court of God Indra, play within play. In *Harivamsha Purana* written around third or fourth century AD gives a detailed description of women casts who are staging a number of episodes from Krishna's life on sea-shore. Indian women's entry into cultural arts has been pioneered by Devadasi, tawaifs in various places.

Christine Garlough, a performance theorist, on the point of 'gaze' opines: 'The sense of gaze also worked productively to connect the actors together, creating a sense of 'witness'.... The performers on stage directly addressed the audience, challenging the 'pornographic gaze' and 'panoptic discipline' of the female body' (178). Garlough claims that these feminist performances illustrate realities that many women have actually lived and felt, and thereby create a testimonial of women's personal experiences of gender inequality (178).

Indian women playwrights like Saoli Mitra, Poile Sengupta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, Mahashweta Devi revisited the Indian folk forms and re-interpreted the stories of the great epics-the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in their own voices. They radicalized

the traditional Indian theatre. Mahashweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra* is a series of play that raises some critical questions after the war of Kurukshetra. It looks at the position of women and the egoistic nature of the war. *Thus Spake Shoorpanakha, so said Shakuni*, a play by Poile Sengupta, addresses the gender role and deconstructs the theory of 'good versus evil'.

Saoli Mitra has been a popular playwright, a director and an actor in contemporary Bengali theatre. Mitra's plays: *Nathabati Anathabat* (1983), and *Katha Amritsaman* (1990). She has performed as an actor in various plays like *Chandali*, *Bitata Bitangsha*, *Putulkhela*, *Pagla Ghora*, *Pakhi* and others. She directed the theatre group 'Pancham Baidik'. She is also popular for the role of Bangabala in Ritwik Ghatak's *Jukti Tokko Aar Gappo*.

*Nathabati Anathabat*, translated from Bengali into English by Rita Datta in the year 2006 as *Five Lords, Yet None a Protector*. The first in modern Bengali theatre to provide a vivid feminist interpretation of the characters of *Mahabharata*. It defamiliarizes the traditional patriarchal ideology especially in the character of Draupadi. Utpal K. Banerjee, an Indian writer defines the title of the play as a woman, despite having a husband, remains as if without one. Saoli Mitra is introduced to the world of *Mahabharata* by her father Sombhu Mitra, a famous theatre personality, who gifted her Irawati Karve's *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* (1967). Mitra portrays the acute suffering, dishonour and humiliation that Draupadi had to endure, in spite of having five mighty men as her husband.

A lucid trajectory of emboldening feminist voices can be observed in between Pratibha Ray's Draupadi of *Yajnaseni: the Story of draupadi* (1995) and Saoli Mitra's Draupadi. Though both are re-tellings of the masculine epic from Draupadi's point of view but one can notice a significant shift from the 'other' to the 'self'. Ray's portrayal of Draupadi as a vulnerable woman, taking immense pride in being a perfectly dutiful, obedient and a devoted wife, is a complete contrast to Mitra's Draupadi, who is bold, outspoken and is outwardly questioning the male dominated social order, war and oppression. Draupadi has been one of the most intriguing and sacrificing mythical character and has been the subject of diverse explications.

In this drama for the first time one can see a character-centered narration. Draupadi is portrayed as a highly individualized figure with human emotion, not a fossilized mythical character. Mitra's artistic dexterity provides a distinct voice to the subdued fringe female characters. Women with their complexities, unfulfilled love, and unheard protest in the male dominated world are humanized. She gave a new dimension to her play. Mitra chose the ancient Indian folk form of *kathakata* which evolved a play with only a single female character and band of chorus-cum-musicians or the *juri dal* to aid her. She uses the narrative technique '*kathakata*' to unravel the story of the mythical character Draupadi.

The *kathakata* is a conventional form of rural entertainment, a religious recital based on Indian folklore. 'Kathakata' literally means the performance of a kathaka. Kathaka is a singer, or a group of singers who in accompaniment with live music and dance, recites the episodes from epics- 'Katha' also signifies stories. The Kathaka is akin to 'Suta', a bard or a reciter. Mitra is the narrator as well as the 'Sutradhara' of this kind of narrative technique. The unnamed '*kathakthakurun*', a young woman narrator is seen playing multiple roles in the play and re-telling the story of Draupadi. The two worlds- the contemporary and the mythological are interconnected.

In the opening of the play, the chorus is seen singing Draupadi's heart's longing desire and *kathakthakurun* is seen sitting beside them, meditating and contemplating. Mitra as the narrator keeps commenting on the action of the play.

**Kathak:** Namaskar

I bow before you, Good Sirs! But what story shall I tell? I can't seem to find any! I mean, well, there is much to say, so many stories.

The words of the Mahabharata

Are ineffitable, like 'amrit'. (Mitra 5-6)

Here we get a glimpse of the narrator's rustic background in her use of language. Through this technique, Mitra has given a different dimension to the epic tradition by making her subside from her lofty pedestal.

Mitra, in the beginning of the first act, gives a dramatic description of Draupadi as 'A queen- yet not a queen. An empress -yet not an empress. Mistress of a kingdom. Yet a queen without a kingdom. The tale of a hapless woman who had everything yet nothing' (Mitra 6). Draupadi has been interpreted in a new light; as Nabaneeta Dev Sen Remarks, she has seen Draupadi from 'a pair of women's eyes' (Mitra ix). Draupadi is portrayed by Mitra not only as a great mythology-cal character, but also a prototype of the suffering women in the contemporary era.

The physical beauty of Draupadi doesn't fail to captivate her suitors in the svayamvara sabha. She has been described as slender waist and her body radiates the sweet aroma of the blue lotus. Vyasdev's *Mahabharata* eloquently describes Draupadi as emerging from the sacrificial fire of the Yajna performed by king Drupad to avenge his childhood Brahmin friend Dronacharya. Vyasdev describes Draupadi as:

...she was born from a portion of sachi, in the race of Drupada

Her eyes were like lotus leaves, her thighs were fair and round

And her dense masses of hair were black and curly, she was

Endued with all auspicious marks.

She was the charmer

Of the hearts of the five kings of men (the Pandavas). (Dutt 99)

Svayamvara Sabha with its archery contest was designed by Drupad especially with a purpose, that Arjuna should win the contest and marry Draupadi, thus making the entire meaning of Svayamvara frivolous in the sense that the bride had no freedom to choose her husband. The main motive was on strengthening the political alliance between the Pandavas and king Drupad. According to Chaturvedi Badrinath, "Draupadi's 'svayamvara' was not a contest for gaining her but a contest for a kingdom, a 'mahotsava' for a future great war"(176).

Draupadi embraces the tragic fate from the very first day of her marriage. When Kunti, her mother-in-law, inadvertently asks her sons to 'share' whatever they have received as alms. The Pandavas were 'aglow with desire' (Mitra 23). Draupadi was a pawn in the hands of patriarchy, which always tried to suppress women and deprive her bodily rights. She was a victim of revenge and male lust. On the patriarchal set-up, Kate Millet asserts:

Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character...is carried out for masculine satisfaction, the exhilaration of race hatred, and the interest of property and vanity (honor). (44)

Draupadi's polyandrous marriage expedited the oppression of women. Sharad Patil, a sociologist, observed that in fraternal polyandry, a woman is married to several brothers of a same consanguine group, is an important shift towards patriarchy. This injustice to Draupadi has been questioned by the *kathakthakurun* of Mitra's play: 'Did she want this?' (Mitra 24).

Draupadi is not an ordinary woman but she is born out of the sacrificial fire, a very strong woman and Mitra has given her a distinct voice in the play. With the description of the dice game, the *kathakthakurun* is seen disparaging the male dominated social order:

Could it be that gambler that lurks deep down in all of us suddenly grew powerful without Yudhistir? So that, even though he knew of the impending doom before him, he just could not stop himself, but went on staking pawn after pawn? (Mitra 30)

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The dice game played a predominant role in determining the future of the Pandavas, the plight and suffering they had to face. Losing everything he had, even his brothers, Yudhistira even pawned his wife, Draupadi, the beloved of the five Pandavas, to the Kauravas. Draupadi's humiliation reaches the pinnacle during the dice game episode. The narrator bursts out in rage: "The son of Dharma ...thinks neither of the husband's moral obligations, nor of the wife's rights. How absurd, how very absurd! How unfortunate Panchali is, How very unfortunate" (Mitra 32).

The myths that endorse the repression of women is interrogated by Mitra in the play. It was Draupadi who as the 'Sahadharmini' of the five Pandava brothers had to sustain all sufferings. Mitra brings into light the sincerity and dedication of Arjun who fails to protect when her honour was in jeopardy. Bhima's responsibility and love are brought into light who protects Draupadi from the diabolical advances of Jayadrath and Kichak. The *kathakthakurun* questions "And on that horrible day, the day of the dice game? Arjun had remained silent. Why he had not come forward to protect the honour of his beloved Panchali" (Mitra 45).

Mitra has stripped Draupadi of her epic status and delineates her as a human being with vulnerabilities. Mitra with her theatrical technique has beautifully portrayed the pain and the inhumanity inflicted on mythical Draupadi. Her suffering and the endurance of pain can very well be connected with the hardships; a woman has to face in the contemporary era. Mitra's Draupadi is not a docile lady. She is capable of asserting her arguments. She defied Yudhistira, asking the cause of her agony, 'Why am I in this state? Why have I to endure this misery?' (Mitra 47).

In literature through ages, women has been portrayed as numb, devoid of any emotion, their revolt unresponded, their dreams not concretized. Reflecting on this, Helene Cixous opines: "Muffled throughout their history, they[women] have lived in dreams, in bodies, in silences, in aphonic revolts" (886).

Mitra's Draupadi is well versed in *Shastras* and she doesn't hesitate to question the eldest Pandava brother Yudhistira, about his view to follow the righteous path always, 'You speak of Dharma and the sculptures. Why then did u play the game of dice? You know what the *Shastras* say? The *Shastras* say that gambling is a vice. Yet u played the game of dice' (Mitra 47-8). She was objectified both by the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

The *Mahabharata* as an Indian epic has been re-interpreted and re-created by different writers. Draupadi is a pan-Indian phenomenon and the 'disrobing scene' has been portrayed in different Indian languages. The disrobing episode of the *Mahabharata* and Krishna's involvement in it has got several variations. Kisari Mohan Ganguly's translation of Vyasa's



*Mahabharata* portrays Draupadi as crying aloud and praying to Lord Krishna for protection, he comes to her rescue and provides her with an unending robe.

Whereas, the Poona edition of the *Mahabharata* does not mention of Lord Krishna's interposition; there is only mention of a new robe in place of the old one when Duhshasana tries to pull her cloth. However, Mitra does not mention of Krishna's intervention. The notion of a transcendental signified has been deconstructed by her in the play. Mitra seems to be reiterating Derrida's deconstruction of the notion of centre in a structure: "The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality, the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center" (90).

The Draupadi of Mitra's play is not a voiceless woman. She has voice and is self-reliant. When Duhshashana grabbed hold of her hair, pulling her to the sabha, then the *kathakthakurun*'s expression and movement seems to be that of humiliation.

Kathak- Draupadi: No! Duhshasana, no! Don't take me to sabha.

I'm a woman. I belong inside the home. Ooh! Let, go of my hair, Duhshasana, let go! I'm menstruating. I'm wearing only one piece of cloth. Don't take me before the court in this condition. I beg of you! Have mercy on me! Please, Please. (Mitra 35)

Draupadi of Mitra's *Nathavati Anathavat* longs to establish 'Dharmarajya', she talks of dharmayuddha- 'let there be war for justice to reinstate morality' (Mitra 59). She always dreamt of an empire where women should be treated with respect and not experience humiliation meted out to her, where her glory and respect has been stripped off. All her hope of establishing a rule of virtue gets shattered after the war. The repercussions of the war befuddles her. The battlefield had turned into a crematorium. She challenges Krishna when he advocates peace, saying,

If I forget the humiliation inflicted on me, dear friend, will it usher *Dharmarajya*, the rule of virtue, into this world! Can you promise that in the future no woman will ever be persecuted and demeaned like I was? Will any forgiveness usher in that heavenly state? (Mitra 60)

Saoli Mitra's play talks about Draupadi's *Mahaprasthan*a, journey towards heaven after the war. She portrays the life of Draupadi filled with pathos. After walking for months when she collapses, exhausted, then she hears Yudhistira telling Bhima the reason behind her

collapse with much anguish, 'For the sin of loving Arjun the most' (Mitra 66). The *kathakthakurun* narrates the last words of Draupadi.

Kathak: Dear sirs and a smile appears on her withered face. With great effort, she tries to hold Bhima's face between her hands, bathing it with her tear

Draupadi summoning her last breath

Be mine in my next birth, Bhim, I want only you to be mine. (Mitra 70)

The play has universalized the experience of a single woman to signify the miserable predicament of women since time immemorial. The intrusion of the narrator and the dynamic action of the mythical stories supports the audience to play an active role in critically evaluating the play.

Mitra's Draupadi has endured both agony and suffering. The anguish of the whole era has been encapsulated in her persona. She voices her disgruntlement against the victimization of women by questioning the patriarchal assumptions as well as injustices that she faced in a phallogocentric social system. Mitra with her skilful theatrical technique has not only subverted the male-hegemony in theatre but has also transformed the mythical Draupadi into a strong woman with both social and personal emotion who challenges the patriarchal constructs of her era.

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