

Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*

In Hindu mythology, few women stand out as much as the character of Draupadi. Draupadi is the wife of the five Pandava princes in the Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*; she is a heroine who is unpredictable, unwavering and who could also possess the austerity of a traditional Hindu wife. Many see Draupadi as an early feminist because of her fearlessness in admonishing those who harmed her or her family. Draupadi existed in a time when a woman's role was to serve her husband. As Dr. Vanamala Bhawalkar states "[in] Draupadi's Era, there was no question of women's equality with men. The wife was the counterpart of her husband and both together became a complete person. As Milton had said "He for God and she for the God in him" was true in those days."(150) The unique relationship between Draupadi and her husbands is what makes her story so exceptional. Draupadi, the wife of the mighty Pandava brothers was anything but a conventional wife; she was smart, bold and would often lead her husbands into action.

There are few women that compete with the beauty of Draupadi; all those that met her adored her. Her beauty was so great that she delighted all of the human senses. Alf Hiltbeutel states this of her beauty: "[T]he very sight of her was magnetic due to her irresistible beauty and fragrance"(Hiltebeutel 267). Draupadi's beauty would gain her much attention, but it is her ability to balance her beauty with the desirable traits of a wife that gain her such devotion. However, as Bhawalkar notes, it was not only her beauty that won her praise: "Yudhishthira said that she was such that any man would desire and that she never committed any sin. Bhima equaled her to the ancient famous wives. Her mother-in-law Kunti praised her for the virtues and her laudable behavior with all her husbands"(Bhawalkar 141). Draupadi was as skilled in the arts of being a woman, and everything that was associated with womanhood, as she was gifted in beauty. Her opinions were well respected and supported by her family due to her vast knowledge

of many subjects. Unlike many women in her era, Draupadi's father, Drupada, allowed Draupadi to be educated. Bhawalkar comments on Draupadi's education: "Drupada had engaged learned Brahmanas for the education of his sons. Draupadi also joined them and became an expert in Political Science"(Bhawalkar 3). It is possible that the unique qualities that Draupadi possessed, such as strength and audacity, are a result of being educated. Having such a complete education would have given Draupadi a sense of confidence unfamiliar to most women. Also Draupadi was quick to learn and thirsted for knowledge; she had a keen memory and had a vast knowledge on many subjects. Bhawalkar comments on the success of Draupadi as a student: "She became known as Pandita (learned and wise) and grew up a charming maiden admired by all"(Bhawalkar 4). Bhawalkar affirms that these attributes are a part of why Draupadi was so well liked and respected. Her intellect and knowledge did not however hinder her ability to be a dutiful wife. "Draupadi was a devoted wife, chaste, religious minded and adhering to duty. Her integrity and fidelity were admirable. She was always careful to please her husbands, served not only them but even their wives"(Bhawalkar 142). Draupadi was concerned with the common good of all her family and believed that a family functioned best as a whole unit. Draupadi was so devoted to her husbands that she followed them into exile and a life without lavishes. Sandy Sutherland notes that in exile she is depicted as: "having suffered great insult, but faithfully following her husbands into exile and enduring the hardships of the forest. It is from these scenes, and not from her life in the palace, that we learn of the real character of Draupadi"(Sutherland 68). She was quick to see the benefit of her polygamous lifestyle and was able to take all obstacles in stride. Draupadi possessed the desirable traits of many women, and was able to use these traits to influence and control. Draupadi had a great understanding of the balance between being bold and forthright, and being submissive and dutiful.

Of all the parts in the *Mahabharata* that include Draupadi, the story of Draupadi's *Cheer-Haran* remains the most vivid. This is an important event because it is one of the main reasons for the *Mahabharata* war, and it is also a breaking point for Draupadi. The climax of this event is when Draupadi is dragged into court after Yudhishthira had lost her in a bet to the Kauravas, along with all of his wealth and kingdom. The character Dushsasana, one of the Kaurava brothers, attempts to strip off Draupadi's *sari*. However, Draupadi prays to Krsna and he works a miracle to prevent her *sari* from running out of layers. Draupadi is humiliated by this and is angered by the Pandavas inability or reluctance to help her. It is her reaction to this abhorrence that we see Draupadi's bravery, as she reprimands those around her in the court. Bimal Krishna Matilal comments on her courage: "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"(Matilal 143). It is Draupadi's reaction to situations like these that set her apart from her husbands; she is often the first to react to any injustices and is a visibly powerful figure often controlling the Pandavas. Sutherland comments on the power that Draupadi possesses in this incident: "The episode is ironic, though. During the scene we are made aware that the beautiful Draupadi is possessed also of quick wit and a clever tongue. Her ability at debate is soon demonstrated, and at the conclusion of the episode, we realize that her wit has saved her husbands from impending slavery"(Sutherland 67). The Pandavas recognize what Draupadi is capable of and listen to her. Because she possesses such vast knowledge on politics, the Pandavas are inclined to listen to her and frequently rely upon her for decision-making. This is not to say that Draupadi was invincible, she was greatly affected by conflict and would become emotional. Bhawalkar comments the on emotional side of Draupadi: "Draupadi, unlike the

mythological goddess or the ideal heroines of our ancient literature, was quite human with human emotions and feelings like anger, love, hate, happiness and grief. Her life was full of ups and downs and she maintained her dignity in both the situations”(Bhawalkar 141). It is Draupadi’s ability to overcome adversity in a venerable manner that sets her apart from other women. In the *Mahabharata* she proves that no situation is insurmountable, and she never abandons her husbands, regardless of the positions they lead her into.

After the incident at the court of the Kurus, Draupadi emerges as a much more powerful character and this is seen in the interactions with her husbands. Bhawalkar remarks on Draupadi’s relationship with her husbands: “Draupadi was not a dumb follower of her husbands. She had her own individuality. Though soft speaking she used harsh words to her husbands and others when necessary”(Bhawalkar 143). This boldness is what sets her apart from other women in the epics. The Pandavas are accepting of this treatment possibly because they feel guilt for their abandonment of Draupadi at the court, or possibly because they truly trust in her decisions. The Pandavas often looked to Draupadi for guidance and approval. Draupadi was in many ways equal to her husbands and they desired her respect. Despite the fact that Draupadi eventually forgives her husbands, she is left with a desire for vengeance, and is quick to seek revenge on those who offend her or her family. Draupadi begins to be recognized for this aggressive attitude and her enemies are wary of her power. Enemies knew that Draupadi had a great influence on the Pandavas and she was feared because of her vast knowledge on all things moral. “She could argue forcibly to win her point with apt quotations and illustrations from her fund of knowledge on various subjects like righteousness, duties and codes of conduct for the four Varnas (castes), moral, legal and ethical codes and was called Dharmajna, Dharmadarsini”(Bhawalkar 141).

Although Draupadi was desperate for revenge on those who harmed her, her distinction between right and wrong was rarely clouded and she was often in pursuit of justice.

Draupadi's distinction among other women from the epics is paramount and well deserved; she was far ahead of her time, often found commanding her husbands to do her bidding. It is her ability to use her position with responsibility and insight that show her true power as a woman. Dr. Bhawalkar summarizes Draupadi's unique qualities:

Yet the superb qualities of Draupadi like steadfast devotion to duty, spirit of self sacrifice, fortitude; courage, capacity for hard work, presence of mind, perseverance, endurance, thirst for knowledge, wisdom to discriminate between right and wrong and strength to fight against injustice, truth, modesty, forgiveness, softness and harshness as the occasion demanded – these and such other qualities seen in Draupadi's life are universal and beyond the limit of time and space. (Bhawalkar 151)

Draupadi's fearlessness and uncompromising nature makes her of great importance in the history of mythological women and of women today.

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