

## Draupadi

Draupadi's story originates in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharata* is believed to have been composed between 200 BCE and 200 CE, authored by Vyasa and said to be the longest epic in history (Rodrigues 227). Its writing is followed by the Kali Yuga, which was a period of retrogression in which families were waging war. (Rodrigues 227). The epic stories are thus centered on this tension among family members, but also introduce a variety of social issues, including the role and representation of women in Hindu culture. Draupadi is the central female character in the epic and embodies a very dynamic role model for women. Her role symbolizes the concerns for the treatment of women in a society dominated by patriarchal ideals (Sutherland 63). Vyasa is careful however to ensure that this concern is not easily suspected. Her presence in the *Mahabharata* discloses a criticism of authority (Hiltebeitel 240). Although her behaviour occasionally challenges the traditional view of women, Hindu women may acceptably adhere to Draupadi's role as a wife and a woman in society.

Draupadi was the daughter of King Drupada and was born through exceptional circumstances. Her and her brother, Dhrstadyumna arose from a sacrificial fire (Hill 249). Her descriptions from the onset of the epic focused on her astonishing physical appearance.

She was beautiful and enchanting; she had a lovely body and a waist the shape of the sacrificial altar. She was dark, had eyes like lotus leaves, and dark, wavy hair. She was a goddess who had taken on a human form. Her scent, like that of a blue lotus, perfumed the air for the distance of a mile. She possessed the most beautiful figure; none was her equal on earth (Sutherland 64).

Women were made to be beautiful and desirable to men and Draupadi was so desirable that she became the wife of five men, the Pandavas brothers, who became her husbands through contest. Yudhisthira was the eldest brother who possessed great *dharmic* qualities, very honest and just, which continually came into conflict with the protection of Draupadi (Sutherland 64). Bhima and

Arjuna were the next two brothers who were both great warriors, fearless and strong with a great love for Draupadi (Sutherland 64). Nakula and Sahadeva were the youngest twin brothers who were born of a different mother (Rodrigues 229). Arjuna the great warrior won Draupadi in an archery contest but the other brothers, so smitten by her beauty, wanted her as well and so Draupadi agreed to marry them all (Rodrigues 230). Draupadi remains a good wife to all her husbands.

She devotedly serves her husbands and their other wives without pride, anger or desire. With affection and self restraint she waits attentively on their wishes without any selfish thoughts. She works hard to manage the home never speaks harshly, never laughs loudly, never causes offence and is never idle. She never cooks food her husbands do not like, and she is dutiful in performing the offerings to the ancestors and in serving guests. Even though they are gentle by nature she treats her husbands as if they were venomous snakes, always prone to anger the eternal *dharma* for a woman is to serve her husband in this way, for he is her god and she has no object in her life other than his service (Sutton 423).

This passage is Draupadi's response to Satyabhama's question in the *Mahabharata* in regards to Draupadi's husbands' submissive but never angry demeanor. It demonstrates the embedded teachings of the epic. A woman should remain devoted and her *dharma* can be found in her service to her husbands. This passage also reveals the godliness of a woman's husband. However, while Draupadi may disclose this devotional dialogue there are three main events of the epic which demonstrate her challenges to this devotion.

The *Mahabharata* accompanied with the *Ramayana*, the two major epics of the Hindu tradition, focus on principles for life on earth. Draupadi and Sita, the goddess of the *Ramayana*, serve as role models for women and their functions. Draupadi's character provides a model of female behaviour that women may safely copy, (Sutton 422) however in some instances her actions are questionable in regards to the traditional patriarchal society from which these women arose. As such, Sita is considered the ideal wife and woman (Sutherland 63). Draupadi is very

outsspoken in three major events of the *Mahabharata* in which she questions the godliness of her husbands, specifically Yudhisthira. The first of these events occurs between a meeting of the Pandavas with their rival cousins the Kauravas. Yudhisthira, faithfully following *dharmic* principles, enters into a game of dice with his cousin Duryodhana (Rodrigues 231). After losing his kingdom and all his possessions he tried to win them back by staking himself and then Draupadi (Rodrigues 231). Yudhisthira elaborately describes his wife as to make her a desirable stake in the game.

She is not too short, nor is she too large; nor is she too dark nor is her complexion red. She has eyes reddened from passion. I will stake her – whose eyes and fragrance are like autumnal lotuses. Attached to modesty, she is, in beauty equal to Sri, the goddess of beauty. Were a man to desire a woman, she would be like this one, on account of her beautiful figure; she would be like this one on account of her perfect character. She is the last to sleep and first to awaken. She knows everything, down to the jobs both completed and not yet done by the cowherds and shepherds. Like the jasmine flower, the *mallika*, is she; with her perspiring face she appears similar to a lotus. She has red eyes, long hair, a waist as slender as the sacrificial altar, and a body with no excessive hair (Sutherland 65).

Draupadi is described as the perfect wife and woman and then becomes the object not only of desire but also of sexual abuse in the present disregard of her husbands. Being won by the Kauravas, Duhsasana orders her to be stripped naked and begins to peel off her clothing. However, Draupadi, humiliated by such a notion, prayed to Krsna for help who came to her rescue in the absence of any assistance from her husbands (Rodrigues 231-232). Outraged that her husbands did not come to her aid her anger became observable to the entire assembly and she embodies an aggressive attitude in response to her husbands' passive manner. The situation justifies Draupadi's response to defend herself. Only divine intervention kept her from being completely degraded in the presence of her husbands and the entire assembly, thus her anger is justified (Sutherland 66). While women, during this time period, were considered the lesser sex in a relationship women themselves were not completely disregarded.

The epic includes two more events in which Draupadi is sexually assaulted in the absence of her husbands, both physically and behaviorally. The first involves the love-sick king Jayadratha who abducts Draupadi when she refuses his advance (Sutherland 68). Her husbands are away from the palace at the time of the abduction and she must defend herself. The second event happens in the last year of the exile, the Pandavas and Draupadi disguised themselves in the court of Virata to remain hidden from the Kauravas (Sutherland 69). Draupadi disguises herself as a servant to Queen Sudesna whose brother, Kicaka, propositions her (Sutherland 69). In this last event Draupadi is again let down by her husbands, most specifically Yudhishthira.

Kicaka, even more infatuated by the luckless princess, enlists the queen's aid to help him win her. Sudesna, despite the protestations of Draupadi, sends her to Kicaka's chamber with some liquor. Draupadi, upset at being sent into what she correctly perceives is a compromising situation, prays to Surya, the sun god: As I have never claimed another man but the Pandavas, by this truth, let me not fall under Kicaka's power when I arrive there. Answering her prayer, Surya sends an invisible *raksasa* to protect her. Kicaka attempts to seduce her, but she runs for protection to where Yudhishthira is. Kicaka grabs her by the hair and while Yudhishthira looks on, throws her to the ground and kicks her. The *raksasa* sent by Surya pushes Kicaka senseless to the floor (Sutherland 69-70).

In every situation, Draupadi is left to protect herself, usually calling on a god to help her. However, it is through these situations that her behaviour is justified. When the husband will not provide protection a woman must take matters in to her own hands. However, the message is still embedded in the literature that a woman should remain faithful to her husband(s).

It is important to consider the epic from the perspective of the time in which it was created. However, this does not mean that its teaching's have not permeated modern Hindu culture. Modern Hindu thought still attests to patriarchal virtues in which women are considered inferior and subject to their passionate nature (Sharma 41). This indicates that the dynamics between men and women are still evolving in a male dominated system. Nevertheless, Draupadi's behaviour identifies with a woman who is articulate and forceful and certainly has an

influence with men (Sutherland 67). This suggests that women were not completely submissive servants but also had a right to their protection and dignity.

The gods are always pleased with those who treat women well and curse those houses where they are mistreated. Manu has instructed that women should be cared for by men for they are mostly weak, easily seduced, soft-hearted and lovers of honesty. Some women are harsh, stupid, and malevolent, but still men should honour them for when the women are satisfied society is peaceful (Sutton 428).

Thus, while patriarchy may still dominate, reverence to the gods suggests a respect and consideration for women. Their inferiority is nevertheless suggested and as such Draupadi, and her bold behaviour, are a significant role model. Throughout the epic, Draupadi's statements about her duty as a wife are an indication that women should still follow tradition. Draupadi imparts not only an example but offers advice that women can safely duplicate and utilize in society.

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## Related Websites

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