

READING DASGUPTA'S PORTRAYAL OF DRAUPADI AND KUNTI

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Abstract

The Panchakanyas - Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari - are considered archetypal figures representing different aspects of femininity and are celebrated for their moral uprightness, loyalty, and other virtues. They symbolize idealized womanhood and are frequently invoked in cultural references, literary works, and religious discourses in India.

Koral Dasgupta has proposed the Sati Series where she would write a text on each of the Panchkanyas. This paper examines two of Koral Dasgupta's works Draupadi and Kunti to note how she has portrayed the characteristics of the Panchkanyas through their first-person non-linear narrative spanning some eventful moments of their lives. Based on the works, this paper discusses how Draupadi and Kunti negotiate their identities and in what ways they shape an Indian mind's understanding of a woman. In this process, the language, the symbols used, and the role of nature in their lives have been considered. Feminist and gender theories do not fall within the scope of this paper. The paper also discusses how Dasgupta explores the past glory of India and revives Indian culture through these works.

Keywords: Kunti, Draupadi, Panchakanya, Koral Dasgupta Indian literature, negotiating identity, Indian culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The Panchkanyas include Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara, and Mandodari. Quoting this shloka, "Ahalya Draupadi Kunti Tara Mandodari tatha Panchkanya samaranyam mahapataka nashaka", Bhattacharya deems it mysterious that these five women are called Kanyas despite having unique sexual encounters. At the same time, he notes that they have other characteristics that qualify them as great women. Panchkanyas, also known as the "Five Virgins," or as Bhattacharya calls them, "Five Holy Virgins" is a concept rooted in Hindu mythology - as suggested by the shloka - and is often referenced in Hindu scriptures and folklore. (Five Holy Virgins) The concept of Panchkanyas is primarily derived from cultural interpretations, folklore, and popular storytelling in Hindu traditions. The classification is based on a combination of factors including their significance in Hindu mythology, their portrayal in various Hindu scriptures and epics, and their representation of certain virtues and ideals. This concept is not a strict religious doctrine or a completely accepted categorization. It is more of a traditional and cultural reference that has been popularized over time in Hindu folklore, literature, and religious discourse. The attributes and qualities associated with these women are based on their portrayal and characterization in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, as well as regional folklore and adaptations.

Koral Dasgupta acknowledges this in the introduction to Draupadi. She notes that the Kanyas have, in some textual pieces of evidence, also been called Maha Satis, where the term Sati means "pure, devoted and fair." (xvii) This could imply that all the women classified as Kanya possess these qualities. Dasgupta presents her interpretation of the word pure as "purity that is brave enough to present itself the way it is - sans any cosmetic cover - and mirrors the mind unpretentiously as much as it exposes the politics of a society." (Draupadi xvii).

Given this background of the Panchkanyas and Dasgupta's reading of the term "pure", this paper examines two of her works, Draupadi and Kunti based on the following questions:

1. To what effect does Dasgupta portray the characteristics of these women through the narrative?
2. How does her portrayal shape a modern reader's understanding of these women?
3. In what ways does Dasgupta explore the glory of India and revive Indian culture?

2. THE WORKS

Kunti and Draupadi by Koral Dasgupta reimagine the lives of Kunti and Draupadi, central characters in the ancient Indian epic, the Mahabharata. The works provide a fresh perspective on their experiences, emotions, and choices as two of the Panchkanyas. On the one hand, in the Mahabharata, Kunti is portrayed as the mother of the Pandavas, the five heroic brothers who play a significant role in the epic. However, Kunti goes beyond her traditional role as a mother and explores her individuality, desires, and struggles. The novel delves into Kunti's early life, starting from her childhood and upbringing. It traces her journey from being a young girl with dreams and aspirations to becoming a queen and a mother. It provides an insight into her relationships with various

characters, including her father, her husband Pandu, and her co-wife Madri. It ends with the birth of Arjun. On the other hand, Draupadi who was born from fire is a beautiful woman wedded to the five Pandavas. Often, she is regarded as the cause of the Kurukshetra war. Like Kunti, Dasgupta's narrative of Draupadi moves away from mere events to the tracing Draupadi's emotions in some of the key moments of her life - her views about her father, her swayamvara, her relationship with Arjun and Kunti, how Krishna is her guide, etc. She comes across as a symbol of feminine power and resilience. She is represented as a strong and assertive woman who faces and overcomes challenges with courage and determination.

Koral Dasgupta's interpretation of both characters aims to humanize them and make them relatable to contemporary readers. The works explore their desires, their regrets, and the dilemmas they face as women in a patriarchal society. In her introduction, Dasgupta states, "The Sati series presents an inclusive overview not only of the protagonist's own life but also dives deep into the supposed pain of those around them" (Draupadi xviii) This clarifies her objective in writing these works. The focus is not only on Kunti or Draupadi but the other characters whom they interact with. Dasgupta further claims, "For Kunti and Draupadi, a lot is known already. These stories bring under the spotlight the making of these characters, albeit from a non-traditional perspective, which ushers the rangers into a new era of thinking and reimagining." (Draupadi xviii) Thus, through Kunti and Draupadi, Koral Dasgupta intends to offer a nuanced portrayal of the female characters from Indian mythology, providing a platform for readers to engage with and reflect upon their stories in a new and empathetic way.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF KUNTI AND DRAUPADI

Bhattacharya discusses some common features of the Panchkanyas and how they embody them. The features include motherlessness, suffering (theme of loss), resilience, loneliness, and autonomy/freedom. (Living) The one characteristic that Dasgupta explicitly mentions - as discussed above - is purity. Below is my reading of how three of these characteristics - motherlessness, suffering, and purity - are portrayed in Dasgupta's works.

Motherlessness: Draupadi and Kunti both grow up under the care of their fathers. Kunti was working with clay in a garden when she quite frankly asks Kuntibhoja why her biological father gave her away to him. (Kunti 7) The question in itself gives an impression of grief though there are no explicit clues in the text. Kuntibhoja was carving weapons using clay with her; the sudden question shocked him. But, he evades the question and gives her a goal for life, "Be an administrator. The administrator decides what is to be conquered, when and how." (Kunti 9) This demonstrates how Kuntibhoja engages with his daughter and her ambition. In this conversation, another intriguing question that Kunti asks is, "Shouldn't you want your child to be a great conqueror?". (Kunti 8) It is likely that the use of "your child" implies "your son" since a son would carry forward Kuntibhoja's legacy, unlike a daughter. Also, the phrase "a great conqueror" is usually associated with men. However, Kuntibhoja dismisses this point only to acknowledge and give a new direction to Kunti's ambition. He encourages her to be an administrator rather than a conqueror.

In Draupadi, her relationship with Dhruvad, her father is marked by concern - where he neither shares everything with Draupadi directly nor is he able to protect his daughter to his satisfaction, "I wish I could change that I am a king and you are a princess. I wish I could correct the past. I wish my daughter was not plunged into the disorders of others' lives. Destiny has chosen you and, as much as I tried to resist it, you didn't" (Draupadi 24) The anaphora "I wish" demonstrates his desire for something that is unattainable. It also shows how he put in the effort to change the course of her fate but at the same time, did not force Draupadi to steer away. He does not condemn her resistance. In the same vein, Draupadi notes, "Each time King Dhruvad would call me back, interrupting the conversations. But the more he cautioned me to stay away, the more I chased it. Surrounded by the wise men of the kingdom, with my birth charts spread before them, he'd pace up and down the corridor, mumbling things to himself." (Draupadi 25) The verbs "caution" and "chase" are pertinent which connote and emphasize the same idea as discussed with respect to the previous quote. The father-daughter dynamics is also shown by Draupadi's persistent efforts to understand her father, "The misery of my father. I know every statistical detail about our kingdom. My father, however, I don't know well." (Draupadi 27) She seems to regret not knowing him well.

A noteworthy point is that Dasgupta hardly includes any reflections that highlight the absence of a mother, neither in the case of Kunti nor Draupadi. She shows how the two reconcile with their father. Both of them try their best to fulfill their duties as daughters. Their reflections show how they negotiate their identity as a daughter. Each father-daughter duo is distinct, they hardly bear any resemblances to each other. Dasgupta seems to portray two faces of how this relationship features in Indian culture.

Suffering: Bhattacharya states, "Kunti loses her parents and then her husband twice over (first to Madri and then when he dies in Madri's arms)." (Living 5). The first loss has already been discussed in the earlier section - motherlessness. The last loss has not been addressed in Dasgupta's work. What remains here is the second one - that Pandu marries Madri and hence Kunti 'loses' her husband. Considering Kunti's reflections in Dasgupta's work, she deliberately orchestrated Pandu's second marriage because she did not love him and did not want to be sexually intimate with him. Kunti reflects, "I observed Pandu from a distance, whenever I could. There was no arousal of love or lust [...] I wasn't interested in Pandu amorously in the least." (Kunti 115) In such a state of mind, when Kunti and Pandu went to Madra, she "had seen Madri and Pandu exchanging glances." (Kunti 133) The

words show no jealousy or do not question Pandu's loyalty, they are neutral and matter-of-fact. Then, Kunti summoned Vidur and asked him to arrange their marriage, "I told him to get Pandu married to Madri, as that would strengthen the king with attributes that only Madri can bring." (Kunti 134). This shows how women who are conscious of their individual desires could welcome a second wife for the well-being of their husband and also for the prosperity of the kingdom. This also demonstrates Kunti as an administrator as her father had willed her to be.

Describing Draupadi's loss, Bhattacharya notes, "Draupadi finds her five husbands discarding her repeatedly. Each takes at least one more wife." (Living) Dasgupta mainly focuses on Draupadi's relationship with Arjuna than with her other husbands. Therefore, pieces of evidence of how Arjun treats her are found in the text. Hence, my observations are limited to her relationship with Arjun.

In the prologue, Draupadi remarks, "The endurance of a proud prince turned every passing moment into a perennial loss if his wife didn't lavish complete devotion on him. But Arjun would never ask, let alone urge. He could disown with infuriating indifference, everything that was meant to be his. There would be no reluctance on his part if politics merited such benevolence. Just like he had let go of me once, to honour a slip of tongue!" (Draupadi 8) This reveals Draupadi's cognizance of her husband's mind. She knew what Arjun expected of her as a wife though he would not say it aloud. She was also aware that he loved her in a detached way. What is intriguing here is the expression "slip of tongue". According to my reading, this refers to how she was pledged during the game of dice. It creates an impression that she did not believe that pledging her was a wrongdoing. Probably, she implies that this was not the cause of her molestation. Kauravas' obnoxious behavior is a result of their mental makeup. That is perhaps why Dasgupta hardly voices Draupadi's concerns about being pledged at the game of dice. Nevertheless, this, as a reader, I felt is a lacuna. This is a significant moment in her life as a wife and it seems less likely that Draupadi would not have anything to say for/against the event. She hardly explicitly comments on the role of Arjuna or any of the Pandavas. She makes striking comments when she is dragged to court,

I felt dirty. I felt guilty, for reasons I could not explain. I felt responsible for everything that was happening to me. [...] Under such invasion, I experienced the helplessness of a woman - hopelessly compromised before the wicked, wriggling to hide herself, ashamed of nature's bountiful giving to her, constrained to believe that her biggest strength was her worst weakness. Even if I discarded the body, would the soul ever forget this encroachment? (Draupadi 176 - 177)

A reader wonders why she felt "guilty" when she had committed no mistake. A reader is confused as to why she holds herself "responsible" for the incident. At the same time, s/he also feels that Draupadi looks inside to find the cause of the event rather than blaming others. The incident is seen just as a trigger, not as the core reason for Kauravas's behavior. The phrase "hopelessly compromised before the wicked" omits the agent of the action thus keeping the Pandavas away. She laments her anatomical "helplessness" laying bare the fact that the beauty and sexuality of a woman could also be "her worst weakness". How the act lacerates her soul has been highlighted by the use of the noun "encroachment". Overall, Dasgupta unravels this incident through Draupadi's eyes by reflecting on herself, what she does to protect herself (invoke Krishna and follow his guidance), and how she gains the strength to endure the lascivious and filthy comments that the court makes.

How Draupadi suffers when Arjun marries other women has been delineated effectively through this comparison, "I felt an odd kinship with the weapons I hated. We all loved the same man. Did these arrows feel jealous when Arjun returned after each victor, proudly carrying a new weapon achieved by war or by blessing?" (Draupadi 145) The parallel that she draws between herself and Arjun's weapons, and the questions that she asks reveal her state of mind - the pain and agony she feels when Arjun brings home another wife.

These incidents - the one at the court and Arjun's other marriages - present different versions of Draupadi. The lady whose emotions are "pricked, bruised and scarred" (Draupadi 147) when Arjun brings home another wife transcends to a different emotional state when yanked brutally to the court. What is common in both is that she looks inwards to understand herself rather than disowning others. This philosophical approach deviates from the usual understanding of her character.

Thus, through Kunti and Draupadi, Dasgupta shows how two of the Panchkanyas deal with suffering/loss. Neither of them gives up, they find their ways of coping with the situation - whether it is parents or husband(s). Kunti appears more practical and worldly whereas Draupadi is emotional and introspective. With this characteristic, readers can see how they negotiate their identity as a woman and a wife.

Purity: Dasgupta refers to the purity of thought in her works. Since she uses the first-person point of view, the characters have been able to voice their opinions about the events that take place. Nevertheless, it is the author's choice as to which events will be included in the text and consequently, which events will the protagonists reflect on. Koral Dasgupta reveals Draupadi's innermost thoughts in her conversations with Krishna which have been written in italics through the text. These exchanges are frank where Krishna appears more like a friend than the reincarnation of Vishnu - a God. Draupadi accuses him of "psychological espionage" and says, "Louder is your intrusion" (Draupadi 4). A reader would hardly dream of any character saying these things to God, such is the image that has been created in the Indian mind. Another instance is her conversation with Indra about Arjun. Here, Indra's emotions for his son have been revealed by way of the questions that Draupadi asks. For instance, Indra notes how Arjun could not appreciate and enjoy his father's house because his heart longed for Draupadi,

“Amravati was a temporary stop, piled with boons he didn’t want. He kept changing sides on a bed softer than feathers, to rather lie beside Draupadi on coarse grass.” (Draupadi 206). That Arjun could not feel comfortable even in the comforts offered by Indra comes as a pleasant surprise for the reader. Hence, these incidents demonstrate not only the kind of warm relationship that Draupadi shared with Krishna and her father-in-law Indra but also the transparency that they maintained in their interactions.

In Kunti, the reader gets a glimpse of her feelings in her interaction with Surya. After she summons him and enters his premises, she realizes what she has done. She deliberates, “How could I belong to Surya? Hadn’t I always longed for Indra, ever since I had understood the meaning of love? Hadn’t I given myself to the Devraj through elaborate rituals and academic texts and fantasized about him being my lover?” (Kunti 60) Such are her thoughts when Surya announces, “You are married to my ideals by virtue of your intelligence.” (Kunti 60) These ruminations and contemplations along with her conversation with Surya show how Kunti is torn between her love for Indra and her ‘duty’ towards Surya since she invited him. They give the reader insights into Kunti as a human being - who faces dilemmas and takes decisions based on the circumstances rather than adhering irrevocably to her beliefs - she relents to Surya and temporarily lets go of her fascination for Indra.

By letting the readers access the minds of the characters and their interactions with their loved ones, Dasgupta unravels Kunti and Draupadi’s emotions untainted by others’ perspectives. The truth behind their actions and feelings have been vividly explored.

Thus, through these instances from the text, it can be seen how Koral Dasgupta portrays the characteristics of motherlessness, suffering, and purity in Kunti and Draupadi.

4. SHAPING A MODERN READER’S OPINION

The two works could make the modern reader learn, unlearn and relearn various facets of the two women. At the same time, there could be certain aspects of the Mahabharata which could be seen from a different perspective. I would like to discuss two points here, one about women’s sexuality and the other about King Dhruvad.

While narrating stories of the ancient women of India, people prefer evading their sexuality since it is considered debased or immoral. However, Dasgupta unhesitatingly brings the sexuality and sensuousness of both Draupadi and Kunti to the fore. This aspect of how a woman feels with a man is not brushed under the carpet. She graphically paints their sexual experiences to show it is integral to their emotions and feelings. They are not stoic but deeply affected by passion. In Kunti’s case, her passion is mirrored in her interaction with Indra be it in her dreams or in reality. “At the unconditional attention, all perceptions of beauty deserted me; suddenly, it didn’t matter whether I had large eyes or plump lips or a voluptuous body. I was the muse of the lover; I was the need of his heart. I was perfection, whatever that meant.” (Kunti 6) According to me, these words echo the emotions of a woman who wants to feel loved and cherished irrespective of/despite her appearance. Kunti is no different. In Draupadi’s case, her passion is reflected when Arjun is around her, “Standing close to him, I could hear the thumping of his heart. They were the beats of my life too, [...] Arjun’s burning desire to savour life was Draupadi born to quench again and again.” (Draupadi 95-96) The expression “beats of life” show how entwined the two are with each other - that she could not live without Arjun. The verb “savour” indicates the delight, pleasure, and enjoyment with which she felt Arjun desired her. “Quench” connotes how Draupadi is the giver whereas Arjun is the taker since she is the one who quenches his desire. At the same time, the tone reverberates the ecstasy that she feels. These instances of Kunti and Draupadi also show how they negotiate their identity as a lover.

Ordinarily, when the story of Drona and Dhruvad is related by parents and others, they hardly focus on Dhruvad’s thoughts. The story is represented as if Dhruvad did not keep his promise because of his arrogance and pride as a King. Draupadi provides a different perspective on this by presenting Dhruvad’s arguments, “How could someone, who failed to take care of his own family in spite of his incomparable power, bring development to an entire country? [...] I wanted him to return as my equal. He didn’t understand this language of friendship. He wanted favours. A king never accepts favours. The very expectation made Drona incompetent to rule half the country” (Draupadi 31-32) Dhruvad’s interest lies in the well-being of his subjects and he could not trust Drona to do justice. Further, being granted a favor does not entail that Drona will become a responsible leader for his kingdom. Had Drona understood his rights and duties as a would-be king, the scenario could be different.

Thus, the texts shape a modern reader’s opinion about the sexuality of a woman in general and Kunti and Draupadi in particular and their desires - whether the woman has elements of the Goddess or otherwise, whether she is revered or rejected, she is an individual who craves for/delights in love and physical intimacy. Also, the texts tend to give a fresh perspective to events in the Mahabharata, compelling the readers to think critically about the decisions that are taken by the characters.

5. EXPLORING THE GLORY OF INDIA AND REVIVING INDIAN CULTURE

The glory of any country lies not only in the external art and architecture, literature, and other works but in its creators. The women of ancient India are one of them. Their traditions, values, and beliefs have been handed down for generations. However, in some cases, they have been forgotten too. For example, these days, women are often branded as beings with a low IQ. Or, the strength of family relationships and the role of women is often questioned. Below is a brief discussion to show how Dasgupta's works contribute to creating a positive image of women.

Often, women are portrayed as poor thinkers or intellectuals. In an attempt to show the kind of victims that they are, it is forgotten how they exercised their critical thinking faculties and did not always accept things at face value. In Draupadi, she questions why Dhruv could not forgive Drona and if he did not, what the consequences could be; why Dhruv's anger for Drona did not extend itself to Arjun. She seeks an answer to what makes destruction alluring. (32 - 34). Thus, she asks relevant questions that help gain a greater insight into her father's thought process. She thinks about the various aspects of the situation. In Kunti, "Bhishma often sent for me to discuss various issues related to the country or the family, seeking my opinion." (Kunti 137) Further, Bhishma "engaged me in issues of finance and economics, and left happily with my suggestions." (Kunti 138) That Bhishma himself relied on Kunti and was contented with the arguments and suggestions that she made speaks volumes about her critical thinking capabilities.

Generally, in Indian society, there is an impression that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law do not get along well, as Draupadi says, "The relationship with one's mother-in-law is always filled with thorns!" (Draupadi 45) The image of "thorns" shows how the relationship is usually perceived - something that is the cause of pain and irritation, hardly any happiness. However, by portraying a deep and strong bond between Kunti and Draupadi, Dasgupta dispels this notion, showing how such has not always been the case in ancient societies. The narrative of Draupadi shows how their relationship evolves over time. Krishna acts as a mediator in their relationship encouraging and stimulating conversations between them. When Draupadi needed her the most, Kunti remains with her unflinching. She gives Draupadi her space after the court-room molestation scene. "Kunti didn't budge. [...] Like a royal guard, Mother Kunti stood by my door all night. Her unwavering attendance in immaculate white clothes sent ripples of fear, muffling the well-rehearsed speeches of every monarch that came to offer consolatory advice to their favourite daughter-in-law." (Draupadi 195). Draupadi, in her observations, underscores the ironclad support that Kunti renders her when Draupadi was at her weakest juncture. These words create an impression of how relentlessly Kunti protected Draupadi. They make Krishna's words, that Kunti loved both Madri and Draupadi, come true. Though the question of what Kunti was doing when the incident itself took place remains unanswered, Draupadi finds unconditional support in Kunti is clearly revealed here.

Besides, nature has always played a crucial role in Indian culture. It is often used as a symbol to convey deep meaning. Some of the imagery that Dasgupta creates reminds us of our oneness with Nature. Kunti simplifies deep philosophy using the forest as a metaphor, "The forest is beautiful, Draupadi. If you aren't capable of maintaining it, then it is better to delegate the responsibility to someone more qualified. Else, you will have to live with the burden of mismanagement" (Draupadi 41) Kunti says this in the context of getting Pandu married to Madri. The "forest" symbolizes all that one receives/one is given in life. Receiving something "beautiful"/being given something "beautiful" does not necessarily imply that one would be able to handle it efficiently. Nevertheless, the use of language here and the metaphor show how this simple truth is applicable across situations. It emphasizes both aspects of the situation knowing one's capabilities and also other's strengths and weaknesses. The burden on one's conscience about one's incapacity to manage could be greater than being obstinate about retaining the "beautiful".

6. CONCLUSION

Based on this discussion, in her revival of two of the Panchkanyas, Dasgupta portrays significant aspects that shape a modern reader's view of the women - Kunti and Draupadi - and also the works. Further, her portrayal also reinstates some aspects of Indian culture. Some characteristics of the Panchakanyas that also emerges through this discussion are resilience, moral uprightness, and loyalty. All said and done, Kunti and Draupadi remain, in their heart and soul, committed to Indra and Arjun. They remain loyal to the purpose that they have chosen or is thrust upon them - Draupadi does not give up on justice for herself despite knowing the destruction that it would lead to, and Kunti dedicatedly aids Bhishma in administration despite wanting to detach herself. For some of the significant aspects of Kunti and Draupadi's life, a reader might wish Dasgupta had accorded more space in her texts, but authorial choices also need to be respected. Within the realm of her work, the reader definitely finds new avenues to explore and think about whether it is Kunti or Draupadi or the epic itself.

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