

Draupadi: Aspects of Existentialism

Samira Sinha & Harshita Sharma

Abstract

Mahabharata enjoys a unique place in the Indian culture and tradition. This ancient text has defined the idea of Indian literature and Indian consciousness for ages. In the epic, the central focus is on the male heroes but the female characters appear to be insignificant. Their presence and performances are diminutive and much misunderstood in the entire magnitude of this vast epic. Draupadi, the main queen of the Pandavas who plays a major role in the epic is a courageous, erudite and wise woman. The present paper essentially seeks to analyze the existential traits present in her character. An attempt will be made to incorporate a different dimension to the image of this major female character. Her joys and sorrows, the tears of deep despair and disillusionment, her rights and injustices, her justifications and excuses, silence and eloquence, moments of loss and gain, ascents and descents of her role as daughter, wife or queen – are this aspects that need to be viewed from a new perspective in this paper.

Keywords : Anxiety; Courageous; Draupadi; Existentialism; Female; Mahabharata; Silence; Soren Kirkegaard.

Introduction

Existentialism is the philosophy of existence. It deals with the nature of human existence, its value, and its meaning. It has been a part of human life since time immemorial. The scholars argue that the concept of Existentialism as a philosophy of life, and as a way of addressing the issues that matter in the lives of people, is at least as old as philosophy itself. As human life in itself is nothing but an indefinite search for meaning and value of this world, this question regarding the purpose of human existence is pervasive and relevant for all times. The Epic Mahabharata has an overpowering impact on the minds of Indians perhaps next only to the Bhagwat Gita. In the words of Vyasa, all kinds of knowledge present in

the world can be obtained through this divine text -

“In the realm of religion and ethics (dharma), of material progress and prosperity (Artha) of the enjoyment of the pleasures of personal and social life (Kama) and of spiritual emancipation (Moksha) whatever is embodied in the epic, it will be impossible to find anywhere else.” (Adi-Parva, 62.53)

These concepts of Existentialism are distinctly visible in the grand epic of Mahabharata. The characters exhibit various elements of existentialism, for instance, the quest for the meaning and purpose of man’s existence; freedom of choice, the revolt against the existing system, absurdity, the wisdom that comes through suffering, and ego as the root cause of suffering. Draupadi is one such example of an existential figure. While she appears to be ignored by the poet, in favor of the male heroes, even her silences reflect her existential nature. This article, therefore, will focus on the Heroine of Mahabharata and explore her existential behavior.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that there are very few characters in Indian mythology who are more intriguing than the Pandava queen, Draupadi. Her character is complex and fluid. She is a strong woman, an epitome of feminine grace, compassionate and sensitive. An intelligent and fiery personality so radiant and luminous that even in a Patriarchal text like Mahabharata, she outshines some of her male peers. Stranded in a time when gender roles were fixed, this noble queen manages to shine throughout the ages by sheer tenacity and grace.

Yet what makes her stand out? Is it merely because of her physical appearance? Yes, she certainly is the most beautiful woman in the epic, as Vyas points out:

“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... 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 kindness; she would be like this one, on account of her beautiful figure; she would be like this one, on account of her perfect character.” (Vol. 1, 401)

However, it is not just her beauty that makes her different. For existential critics her beauty is not the focal point of her character- it is her passion. As Christopher Panza and Gregory Gale declare in their text ‘Existentialism for Dummies’ -

“All existentialists believe that living with passion is important. Whereas most people take living with passion to mean living frantically and doing lots of impulsive things, that’s not what passion means from the existential point of view. Instead, passion means living life in an intense and deliberate way, one that flows from grappling seriously with the significance and meaning of your own individual life.”(Panza and Gale, 2013, 132)

This statement is especially true in the case of Draupadi. Her passion for life, for her loved ones, her tenacious strength even in the face of hostile situations, her courage and her reason; all of it makes her unforgettable. Throughout the epic, it may be observed that she can stand steadfastly for what she loved and believed in. She stood for dharma. In a society where few women dared to speak against the injustices meted out to them by society, Draupadi comes forth like a blazing trail of fire and asks pointed questions in the Sabha(council) full of Kuru warriors and elders, about the nature of dharma. Her reasonable arguments and calm attitude make her an admirable figure.

Kierkegaard stated that living a passionate life is directly connected with the notion of truth. In this way, he introduced a new notion of truth, one that differs from the typically accepted scientific version. To live truly and passionately, one has to embody the purpose of ones life, identify oneself with it and let it transform one. Draupadi is well aware of her purpose; she is a wife, a mother, a queen, a friend, a caregiver and she is capable of performing all her duties with utmost perfection. But above all, she is a self-respecting woman and she is willing to fight for her identity. Even in the face of mockery, taunts, and violence she courageously stands her ground and raises her voice like a true rebellious existentialist.

Similar to other famous characters of the Epic, Draupadi too enjoys a mysterious, almost mythical upbringing. The circumstances of Draupadi’s birth and ‘upbringing’ cause curiosity as she was fully formed when she emerged from the pit of fire:

“A part of Shri herself was born on earth out of love. She was born as a faultless daughter in the house of Drupada, from the middle of the sacrificial altar.” (Vol.1, 181)

She is born out of the fire and looking at the kind of life she led this is an important motif. Born to a father who desired only a son and bestowed curses upon her instead of blessings, Draupadi was destined for a harsh life. When Draupadi was “conceived” at the altar there was a prophecy

that she was born to create dissent among the Kuru clan,

“Supreme among women, this beauty of the dark complexion will bring about the destruction of Kshatriyas. In time, this one with a beautiful waist will perform the objective of the gods. From her will arise terrible fear among the Kshatriyas.” (Vol. 1, 402)

This prophecy haunted her and her family throughout their lives. But despite such hostile circumstances, she proved her indomitable will and passion for life. She also underwent several obstacles to free and help the mighty Pandavas. Some of these rescue missions were an act of voluntary participation and some were a result of the situation where she plays an important role. Draupadi’s existential heroism is manifested in various ways. Even though she was married to the Pandavas and their fate determined hers, at every step she is a woman of her own will and strength, sometimes even leading Pandavas to victory where they were sure to fail.

The epic properly introduces Draupadi to the readers during her *Swyamwara* (Self-selection of Groom), this event is her first existential crisis in the Epic. The *swyamwara* is followed by the first discord and then by the marriage, which is the essential rite of passage that signifies the end of one life for her and the beginning of a new life. Her rejection of Karna as her potential suitor shows her strength and ability to think for herself. Well aware of Karna’s fame as a warrior, she is unwilling to bow down to his patriarchal outlook when he offers to win the competition to present her as a mere gift to his friend Prince Duryodhana. Her second rejection of Karna’s proposal is even bolder, she dismissed his offer on the ground of his low birth but it is a decision she takes herself fully prepared to face the consequences. Her swift decision and frank manners show her ability to face a crisis.

The epic reaches a more troubling situation when she is faced with the order of Kunti, the mother of Pandavas, to marry all the five brothers even though it was Arjuna who won the competition. Draupadi’s marriage is a cause of anxiety to her and everyone around her. Her brother Drishtadyumna and her father are shocked and horrified to hear Yudhishtira propose that Draupadi be the wife of all five to which with Drishtadyumna clearly objects:

“[Speaking to Vyas] O Brahmana! We cannot perform such an act with a clear mind. I cannot say that Krishna should be the wife of five.” (Vol. 1, 464)

This unusual situation of a woman marrying five men, no matter how earnestly Vyas explains its righteousness to the audience, is not normal and acceptable. It is constantly commented upon by several characters at several times. What shocks the readers is the submissive silence of Draupadi in the face of such disastrous situation. Why would Draupadi agree to such an arrangement? A lot of scholars are of the opinion that the marriage was a forced one and Draupadi's opinion was not solicited. At this point it may be assumed that Draupadi was not a woman to shy away from letting her opinions be known had she disagreed with this. She could have certainly rejected the proposal just as she had rejected Karna, son of a charioteer. One can easily confer by looking at all the other 'unfortunate' instances she comes across that her silence is confounding and questionable.

A situation like this can be explained existentially for Draupadi was not a foolish woman, she was intelligent both emotionally and socially. As the Swayamwara was already concluded with the victory of Arjuna and discord between kings, the political situation was a volatile one. Both Pandavas and Panchaal needed to form strong alliances to deal with any adverse situation, thus this marriage alliance was necessary. Additionally, it is hinted in the epic, that both Draupadi and Kunti could sense the desire of each Pandava to marry the former, that forced Kunti to order the marriage. Well aware of her difficult position, Draupadi like a proper existentialist is willing to submit to the situation for now, only to twist the circumstances in her favor as she makes the Pandavas promise that she will be their sole Queen. In this way, even when the Pandavas marry other women they cannot bring them home and Draupadi remains the only mistress of entire household.

This ability to turn even an adverse situation into favorable one shows Draupadi's courage and cunning. Existentialism does not promote hopelessness when confronted with problematic situations, it encourages the individual not to lose sight of the purpose and to understand better how to attain their objective. Draupadi is a prime example of this ideology.

The second existential crisis faced by Draupadi is probably the pivotal point of the entire Epic, the Game of Dice. Pandavas lose everything in a rigged game of dice: their kingdom and fortune and then Draupadi is also wagered away. When Shakuni finally declares that "Victory is ours" almost immediate summons are sent to bring Draupadi,

"...bring Draupadi

The beloved wife whom the Pandavas honour.” (Vol. 2, 265)

In answer to this insolent summon, Draupadi asks a very important question to the messenger Pratikami who conveys it to the assembly,

“Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?” (Vol. 2,228)

This question leads to another existential turmoil in the Sabha, as Draupadi seeks to know whether her existence is so low that her husband could gamble her as a mere object. The question opened a proverbial can of worms. Enraged by her words, Dushashana is sent to bring her into the assembly and he does so, dragging her forcefully into the assembly by her hair. The people assembled are shocked and Draupadi is utterly humiliated. She looks at the Pandavas who sit shamefaced,

“ ... (She) cast a scornful and sidelong glance at her angry husbands. They didn't suffer that much from the loss of the kingdom, or the riches, or the chief jewels, as they did from Krishna's (Draupadi) sidelong, angry and miserable glance.” (Vol. 2, 231)

However enraged she might have been, she is not beyond reason. Her keen mind is already analyzing the situation and she is ready to defend herself. A true existentialist knows that ultimately their salvation lies in their own hands, Draupadi is no different. Disillusioned and saddened, she knows that her husbands will do nothing to protect her. So she addresses the whole Sabha, calling out to the elders present, criticizing them for not acting and reminding them that they are breaking the very rules on which a good kingdom and dharma is based: -

“The Kurus permit their daughter and daughter-in-law, unworthy of such treatment, to be thus oppressed. Earlier, it has been heard that pure and chaste wives are not brought into the middle of the sabha. Where is the dharma of the lords of the earth? According to dharma, it has earlier been heard that wives are not brought into an assembly hall. That eternal dharma has been lost among the Kauravas. How is it that the chaste wife of the Pandavas, the sister of Parshata's (Drupada's) son and a friend to Vasudev, has been brought to the assembly of Kings? I am Dharmaraja's wife and I was born in the same varna as he. Tell me whether I am a slave or not and I will act accordingly... O Kauravas [sic]! I want you to answer, whatever you might think, and I will act accordingly. Have I been won or have I not been won? (Vol. 2, 239)

Draupadi's questions are devoid of any dramatic element and are based on logic. She states the fact of belonging to the same Varna as the Pandavas hence addressing the issue that she is their equal. And if she is an equal, how can she be wagered by another? A person who is not a master of himself, is he capable of putting at stake another human being without that person's permission? Is the wife akin to a possession, to be owned and wagered away? Here again she questions the value of her existence, her identity, reminding the council of Kings of their duties and her worth.

The fact that Draupadi tries to defend herself is admirable. Once she enters the sabha, it is clear to her that no one is going to stop her humiliation. It is up to her. So, she takes up the delicate subject and tries to argue it rationally so that she and her husbands may be free of humiliation. It is important to observe that at no point in the debate between Draupadi and the members of the sabha does she forget her husbands. Even when she redeems the boon given to her by Dhritarashtra she first asks the freedom of her husbands. Again one is reminded of her existential awareness. She is reasonable and calculative enough to understand that as a married woman her identity is tied to her husbands. She cannot separate herself from them, despite her anger and disgust. She again bows her head but not without a deserved promise of revenge and retribution.

It is also interesting to note that Draupadi is with Pandavas during their exile, aiding and pushing them on. Throughout the epic, her role changes and evolves from a consort, to a rescuer, to a guide to all the Pandavas. She becomes what the situation demands her to be. The fluidity in the role change is deliberate as it is an important characteristic feature of an existential character.

She is manipulative and persuasive. It is her words that remind the Pandavas of their reality and her importance. When humiliated by Keechak, again in presence of incognito Yudhishthira who still refuses to aid her, Draupadi realizes that she has to take things into her own hands. If she wants justice, and she is not going to get it at a court where Keechak was let off with just a slap on his wrist, she will have to get it herself. So she manipulates and entreats Bhīma to exact the revenge she deserved.

Throughout the epic Draupadi struggles with the inner turmoil of the insult to herself and her husbands at the hands of the Kauravas. She entreats, coaxes and threatens the Pandavas to extract revenge for their treatment and not be content with their state (Kairata Parva) and also reminds them of the promises that they have made to her during the fateful dice scene.

She is aware that peace is impossible if Duryodhana and his allies are left alive. She is not ashamed of her desire for revenge. She is well aware of her own shortcomings and faults and willing to face criticism, but as a true existential persona she is perfectly ready to fulfill her wishes. She knows that her revenge can only be acquired through her husbands and allies and she keeps rallying them to achieve her goals.

Her trials make her shine even more fiercely. Draupadi's strength of character is visible to all throughout the Epic- it is her own agency, her own dharma, most importantly her own decisions and actions that rescues her and her husbands in the end.

Conclusion

Draupadi was called Yajnaseni (Born of Holy Fire) not only because she was born out of sacrificial fire but because she embodied the fiery spirit. As shown through her actions and even through her silences, Draupadi's existentialism lies in her passion which is akin to the fire motif that is repeatedly associated with her throughout the epic.

She is not to be viewed as an existential character merely for facing existential crises but because of her outlook towards life and the way she conducts herself. She seeks to live authentically. Coined by Sartre, the phrase "living authentically" is one of the main ideas of existential theory of life. It simply means to live with the understanding that it is the responsibility of individuals to control their lives despite the absurd circumstances. Draupadi is highly individualistic in her approach to the circumstances of her life. She is well aware of her limitations and status in a rigid patriarchal society that sees her as a nuisance because of the uncomfortable questions that she asks both privately and publicly. She is also aware that the only person who can think of her welfare is she herself. Despite all the strictures of society Draupadi is not afraid to speak her mind, to make her own choices and through all of it to stand with her head held high. She explores life in her own manner and takes complete responsibility for her choices. Her existential mindset develops during the entire epic as she sees Yudhishtir's inability to protect her honour and the helplessness of the other Pandavas too during the game of Dice and later in the episode with Kichak. She faces the trials of her life and extracts vengeance on her own terms ready to shoulder the consequences.

As Pandavas represent physical heroism in the epic, Draupadi represents moral heroism. She does not seek mere vengeance. She seeks what Krish-

na seeks and what the epic in general seems to seek. She seeks justice. She seeks to set right Adharma. This is what sets her apart. Like most existential heroes of the Epic she falters but she also manages to find her way back to the right path and sees the bigger picture which no one else is capable of. Her discreet gestures, her significant silences, her reasonable arguments, her curious nature and cautious manner- all these make her an ideal Existential heroine of this grand epic.

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