

## **Speech Acts of Draupadi in *The Mahabharata*: The Case of Sabha Parva and Vana Parva**

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### **Abstract**

Draupadi has been hailed as an extraordinary woman character of *The Mahabharata* and has often been appropriated by feminists particularly on account of her vocality. Her exceptional skill with words makes her an excellent orator and debater—qualities which are rarely represented in women. The epic representation of her character, despite ridden with several flaws, has been appreciated for giving her important and crucial moments of verbal articulation which problematise the very epistemological universe of *Dharma* on which the entire epic narrative sustains itself. Two Parvas of *The Mahabharata*, i.e. the Sabha Parva and the Vana Parva offer some such examples of the exemplary speech acts of Draupadi which throw light on one of the most independent minded women characters of the epic. The article seeks to analyse these speech acts with the intention of bringing out the gender politics underlying these exceptional utterances.

**Keywords:** *The Mahabharata*, Draupadi, speech, discourse.

Any study of *The Mahabharata* remains incomplete without the mention of its central woman character i.e. Draupadi, whose vocal presence in the epic remains one of the most significant examples of the assertion of an empowered femininity within an otherwise male centric text. Epics, in most theoretical deliberations have been constructed as predominantly masculine texts. As observed by Bernard Schweizer:

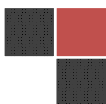
Both in subject matter and in form, epic may well be the most exclusively gender coded of all literary genres; so much so that epic and masculinity appear to be almost coterminous. Thematically, classical epics extol the heroic deeds of illustrious men in warfare and nation- founding while validating the moral, religious, and cultural values of the author's society. Formally, epic has long been considered the crowning achievement of "timeless" poetic genius, the repository of sublime diction, and even the product of divine inspiration—all attributes carrying connotations of masculinity...All of this could be taken as an indication that women and epic are mutually exclusive terms. (Schweizer 1)

Being one of the oldest of epics, *The Mahabharata* too has clearly identifiable masculine concerns of kingship, authority, succession, war, heroism, empire, invasion and *Dharma*. The all encompassing rhetoric of *Dharma*, as embedded within the text of the epic connotes a concern with conduct, morality and ethics across the spectrum of the entire human life which is once again overtly androcentric. The creator, transmitter and the recipients of the narrative of the epic are once again all male. Vyasa, Vaisampayana and Ugrasravas are the men involved in the act of the creation, narration and transmission of the epic. Women have therefore been excluded from the act of transmission and hence can hardly ever claim to suit the narrative for their convenience. Any act of composition/narration is a political act involving the subject position of the narrator who has the full liberty to manipulate the events to suit his (in this case it is his)/her interest. Gender is one among the many factors that influences the act of narration and when women do not share the agency of articulation, their voices reach us through male intervention.

In *The Mahabharata*, women can be seen playing pivotal roles as both speakers and listeners. In his study on the female listeners in the epic, Brian Black has examined the ways in which what both Draupadi and Gandhari say and do are related to what they listen:

Indeed, for both Gandhari and Draupadi their role as listeners, although sometimes relegated to the background, is intrinsically related to what they do and what they say. Despite the fact that the *Mahabharata* does not explicitly state that it is a text for women, through the characters of Gandhari and Draupadi it includes some women as a crucial part of its audience within the very structure of the text. (Black 53)

Various tales are narrated to Yudhishtira and his brothers including Draupadi during their exile in the forest. One such tale is that of Savitri, narrated by the sage Markandeya in the Pativrata-Mahatmya section of Vana Parva. The sage recounts the story of Savitri in response to the question asked by Yudhishtira (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section CCLXLI, Vol 3, 570) Another comment of Yudhishtira elicits a further tale from Markandeya, this time it is the tale of Sita (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section CCLXXI, Vol 3, 533). Many of the questions and the deliberations in the Vana Parva are



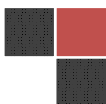
made having Draupadi in mind as a silent listener though she may not be the primary one. One of Markandeya's discourse on the duties of a devoted wife is also articulated in response to a question asked by Yudhishtira regarding the laws of women (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section CCV, Vol 3, 423). Such questions are made with the motive of constructing the paradigm of the devoted wife as the ideal stereotype to be emulated. This prescription has been very subtly built into the narrative of the epic in the light of which Draupadi's speeches need to be interrogated.

There is a section in Vana Parva which relates to the conversation between Draupadi and Krishna's wife Satyabhama. In this speech act of Draupadi, she is seen as towing the conventional line of action as laid down by the lawmakers regarding the behavior of a typical *pativrata*. In most of the speeches made by Draupadi, she claims or rather lends authority to her articulation by referring to those from whom she has learnt or heard the words of wisdom. Her training may be lacking the formal rigour of conventional education but she partakes of the tradition of *shruti* i.e. hearing which comprises an essential part of her training. In her exchange with Satyabhama, she refers to what she has heard from Kunti and how she tirelessly works day and night to appease her husbands. She tells Satyabhama that the wife ought to treat the husband as a god:

I think that to be eternal virtue for women which is based upon a regard for the husband. The husband is the wife's god, and he is her refuge. Indeed, there is no other refuge for her. How can, then, the wife do the least injury to her lord? (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section CCXXXI, Vol 3, 474)

Draupadi's stance as a *pativrata* is a smart and well thought out strategy to make her husbands "obedient" so that she can enjoy absolute authority over them: "O blessed lady, my husbands have become obedient to me in consequence of my diligence, my alacrity, and the humility with which I serve superiors. (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section CCXXXI, Vol 3, 474)".-This kind of strategy suits the nature of Indian feminism since it is not severely individualistic as in the West but rests on a policy of negotiation and cooperation with men. Draupadi can be seen as alternating between the two extremes of confrontation and cooperation in her interaction with men for she knows that both are required depending upon the nature of the circumstance in which she finds herself.

Draupadi is seen as employing various verbal strategies in her speech acts in order to seek revenge. Since her agency is limited, she has to resort to male assistance for avenging her insult. These strategies include debate, persuasion, lament, prayer and chastisement. An example of one such speech act which is a combination of debate, argument and persuasion is her extended dialogue with Yudhishtira in the Vana Parva advocating the necessity for action. She employs the rhetoric of confrontation which stands in sharp contrast to what she had said earlier in her conversation with Satyabhama. An extended analysis of this conversation would bring out the dynamics of the relationship between the husband and the wife within the social hierarchy of the epic. Angelika Malinar<sup>1</sup>, in her extensive analysis of this episode has placed the entire conversation within the context of the gender relationship determined by marriage or other kinship ties within the social world of the epic. When Draupadi contradicts her husband, she deviates from the ideal of the *pativrata* and charts out a completely different trajectory as an extremely vocal, critical and self-confident woman who does not shy away from articulating her thoughts. The variations in the speech acts of Draupadi stand testimony to



her power of oratory and her exceptional dexterity with words. She enjoys the power which emanates from the ability of articulation.

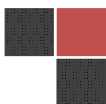
Draupadi speaks in favour of action which according to her is the ideal behavior befitting a king—a status that he has been robbed of by the cunning stratagems of Duryodhana. According to Angelika Malinar, both Yudhishtira and Draupadi have lost the royal status and this debate is a reflection of the crisis arising out of the situation of exile:

Yudhishtira has turned into a husband who no longer lives up to his social position; he is, as we have heard, a husband who does not even own a proper bed. All this threatens the desirable symmetry of the relationship, as Draupadi has to deal with a weakness she has not learned to tolerate – although she has certainly been brought up to be a wife, that is, simply to put up with her husband's decisions.<sup>18</sup> Her argument points to a conflict of role models and social values that has been caused by the situation of exile. (Malinar, 83)

Draupadi's desire for revenge takes the form of severe censure as she reprimands Yudhishtira for his inaction:

O thou best of the Bharatas, thou hast no anger, else why is it that thy mind is not moved at sight of thy brothers and myself (in such distress)? It is said that there is no Kshatriya in the world who is bereft of anger. I now behold in thee, however, a refutation of the proverb! That Kshatriya, O son of Pritha, who discovereth not his energy when the opportunity cometh is ever disregarded by all creatures! Therefore, O king, thou shouldst not extend thy forgiveness to the foe. Indeed, with thy energy, without doubt, thou, mayst slay them all! (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section XXVII, Vol 2, 57)

It is quite extraordinary for a woman of the epic times to speak such an empowering rhetoric of male bashing. She castigates her husband for his lack of anger which is a primary prerequisite for action. Later, she goes on to narrate the ancient story of Prahlada and Vali regarding the relative merits of might and forgiveness in which it is concluded that there is a time and place for both. This kind of illustrative lecture is typical of male speakers and it is quite rare to find women articulating their views with such authoritative voice. It has already been mentioned that Draupadi is “well informed” (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section XXVII, Vol 2, 55). When Yudhishtira gives several counter arguments in favour of forgiveness, Draupadi observes that his senses have been obfuscated. She says, 'I bow down unto *Dhatri* and *Vidhatri* who have thus clouded thy sense! (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section XXX, Vol 2, 62). She, nonetheless, draws flak for being too argumentative and even for being a heretic: “Yudhishtira said, 'Thy speech, O Yajnaseni, is delightful, smooth and full of excellent phrases. We have listened to it (carefully). Thou speakest, however, the language of atheism.’” (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section XXXI, Vol 2, 65). Countering the accusation of being a heretic, Draupadi says, “I do not ever disregard or slander religion, O son of Pritha! Why should I disregard God, the lord of all creatures?” (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section XXXII, Vol 2, 67). Having said this, Draupadi defends her right to question Yudhishtira's inaction by refuting the allegation brought against her. She debates with extreme erudition and defends her argument with the utmost zeal.



Every speech uttered by Draupadi gives us an insight into one or the other aspect of her personality. Whereas the earlier speech reflects upon her debating and argumentative skills, the following speech uttered by her at the moment of Arjuna's departure for the weapon collecting mission is expressive of her tender feelings and exposes the emotional dimension of her personality. She says:

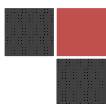
O thou strong-armed one, let all that Kunti had desired at thy birth, and let all that thou desirest, be accomplished, O Dhananjaya! Let no one amongst us be ever again born in the order of Kshatriyas. I always bow down unto the Brahmanas whose mode of living is mendicancy. This is my great grief that the wretch Duryodhana beholding me in the assembly of princes mockingly called me a *cow*! Besides this he told me in the midst of that assembly many other hard things. But the grief I experience at parting with thee is far greater than any I felt at those insults....O sinless one, thy (present) task thou wilt be able to achieve even against powerful enemies. O thou of great strength, go thou to win success with speed. Let dangers be not thine. (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section XXXVII, Vol 2, 92)

While expressing her deepest grief at his departure, she also makes a very pertinent observation regarding the social hierarchy of her times. Looking at the collective fate of the Pandavas, she wishes never to be born as a Kshatriya again. She expresses her disgust of Kshatriya identity by recalling the abominable humiliation that she was subjected to in the assembly hall of Hastinapur. Draupadi is overwhelmed with sorrow at the moment of Arjuna's departure and simultaneously recalls those words of insult and mockery that she had to endure during the dice game in the court of Hastinapur. The implicit agenda underlying her act of reminiscence is to press hard for revenge. The mission on which Arjuna is embarking is therefore directed at the ultimate goal of taking revenge and therefore at the end of her lengthy speech she prays for his success, for she knows that Arjuna's success in gaining the weapons is an essential prerequisite for victory in war. What makes this speech interesting is the very intelligent combination of emotion and strategy. The very voice which expresses grief is also the voice which prays for the successful accomplishment of the mission.

On various occasions in the epic, Draupadi can be seen clamouring for revenge. One such extended dialogue in the Vana Parva has already been examined above. In the beginning of the Vana Parva when Krishna visits the Pandavas in the forest, Draupadi complains to him regarding her treatment in the court of the Kauravas:

Thou art the Supreme lord of all creatures, celestial or human! Therefore it is, O slayer of Madhu, that impelled by the affection thou bearest me that I will relate to thee my griefs! O Krishna, how could one like me, the wife of Pritha's sons, the sister of Dhrishtadyumna, and the friend of thee, be dragged to the assembly! Alas, during my season, stained with blood, with but a single cloth on, trembling all over, and weeping, I was dragged to the court of the Kurus (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section XII, Vol 2, 31)

Being quite intelligent, she frames her identity in relation to all the important and illustrious men to whom she is related in various capacities either as the wife of the Pandavas, the sister of Dhrishtadyumna, or as the friend of Krishna. She deliberately recalls the scene of the heinous crime and employs a rhetoric which would put her male

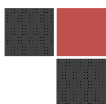


kinsmen to shame including Krishna himself so that they are provoked to take retaliatory action. Adhering to the logic of the patriarchal surveillance of women, she does not at any point seek to supersede the authority of the men. She however sabotages that very authority which claims the protection of women as its right. She exposes the fallacy of patriarchy's claim to be the guardian of women's honour by exposing the failure of the male kinsmen to protect her during the moment of crisis. As the teary eyed Draupadi puts it:

Husbands, or sons, or friends, or brothers, or father, have I none! Nor have I thee, O thou slayer of Madhu, for ye all, beholding me treated so cruelly by inferior foes, sit still unmoved! My grief at Karna's ridicule is incapable of being assuaged! On these grounds I deserve to be ever protected by thee, O Kesava, viz., our relationship, thy respect (for me), our friendship, and thy lordship (over me). (*The Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Section XII, Vol 2, 33)

Her anger against her husbands, sons, friends, brothers and father runs so deep that she goes to the extent of denying having any of them in her life. She throws serious challenge to the patriarchal establishment by symbolically severing her ties with them. By claiming a subjective position that is independent of the male relatives, Draupadi is charting out a unique identity for herself which can be asserted without the reference to any male. However, in the very next line, she seeks refuge in her dear friend (who is also male) Krishna as her last resort. She appeals to him both as a friend and as a devotee—a special quality of the relationship between Draupadi and Krishna is that it simultaneously partakes of the qualities of both friendship and devotion. The unique nature of their friendship has been described by the term *sakhi* (female friend) and *sakha* (male friend). Very rarely do we find the depiction of such male-female friendship in the epic. The cult of Bhakti liberates the woman from the social barriers attendant upon the relationship between the husband and the wife. Draupadi hence is free to speak to Krishna without worrying about the necessity of paying heed to any decorum. She finds a suitable listener in Krishna to whom she desperately appeals for revenge. Draupadi however fails to discern that Krishna too operates within the hegemonic structure of patriarchy that puts statesmanship and politics over and above a woman's concerns.

The most significant speech act of Draupadi occurs in the Sabha Parva during the dice game which is often constructed as an example of how a woman takes recourse to the power of words in order to retaliate against patriarchal oppression. The events running up to the scene of disrobing are illustrative of the erudition of Draupadi since it is her knowledge of laws and jurisprudence that enables her to raise a pertinent question regarding the right of Yudhishthira to pawn her in the first place. When the messenger is sent to the inner quarters to call Draupadi to the assembly hall, she sends him back with the question: "O son of the *Suta* race, go, and ask that gambler present in the assembly, whom he hath lost first, himself, or me. Ascertain this, come hither, and then take me with thee, O son of the *Suta* race." (*The Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2, 126). Standing at this critical juncture, she maintains her mental equilibrium and puts forward a significant point of legality. This question raises a very critical paradox which remains unresolved within the epic. Her question causes a hermeneutic rupture within the discourse of Dharma and hence opens this very discourse to a severely critical scrutiny. On refusing to appear before the assembly without getting a fitting reply, Duryodhana orders his brother Duhshashana to drag her by force. As he begins pulling her by her hair,



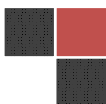
she makes a desperate plea: “Wretch! it ill behoveth thee to take me before the assembly. My season hath come, and I am now clad in one piece of attire.” (*The Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2, 128). Draupadi, on account of her menses was following the ritual segregation as prescribed by the scriptures. She dares to speak on a topic that has been constructed as a taboo in order to drive home the intensity of the outrage that is being perpetrated upon her. On being forcibly brought to the assembly in a disheveled condition, Draupadi confronts the audience and stands to address the Kuru elders who are present in the hall. She shames them for being mute spectators of a woman’s violation of modesty:

Thou draggest me who am in my season before these Kuru heroes. This is truly an unworthy act. But no one here rebuketh thee. Assuredly, all these are of the same mind with thee. O fie! Truly hath the virtue of the Bharata gone! Truly also hath the usage of those acquainted with the Kshatriya practice disappeared! Else these Kurus in this assembly would never have looked silently on this act that transgresseth the limits of their practices. Oh! both Drona and Bhishma have lost their energy, and so also hath the high-souled Kshatta, and so also this king. Else, why do these foremost of the Kuru elders look silently on this great crime? (*The Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVI, Vol 2, 128)

Draupadi’s extremely intelligent negotiation of the male hegemonic discourse stands out in an epic where such feminine articulation is rare. She questions the senior members of the clan i.e. Drona and Bhishma and shames them for their passiveness. She continues her slander against the men and refuses to accept her status as a serving woman. She insists on an answer which the collective male authority fails to provide:

It hath been heard that the kings of ancient days never brought their wedded wives into the public court. Alas, that eternal usage hath disappeared from among the Kauravas. Else, how is it that the chaste wife of the Pandavas, the sister of Prishata's son, the friend of Vasudeva, is brought before this assembly? Ye Kauravas, I am the wedded wife of king Yudhishtira the just, hailing from the same dynasty to which the King belonged. Tell me now if I am a serving-maid or otherwise. I will cheerfully accept your answer. This mean wretch, this destroyer of the name of the Kurus, is afflicting me hard. Ye Kauravas, I cannot bear it any longer. Ye kings, I desire ye to answer whether ye regard me as won or unwon. I will accept your verdict whatever it be.' (*The Mahabharata*, Sabha Parva, Section LXVIII, Vol 2, 135)

It is the argumentative skill of Draupadi which comes to the rescue of the Pandavas though she herself is saved from the act of being stripped absolutely naked through the power of the divine intervention of Krishna. Although she frames her identity through the men to whom she is related in order to depersonalize her insult and to implant it within the male rhetoric of honour, her fiercely independent spirit speaks volumes about her character. It is this intensely outspoken Draupadi who continues to stir the interest of the contemporary readers in the epic. Both the Sabha Parva and the Vana Parva stand testimony to her exceptional speech acts and her question in the Sabha Parva remains irresolvable till the end. She transcends the male constructed status of the woman as mere body by taking recourse to the category of the verbal.



**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>See her essay titled “Arguments of a Queen: Draupadi’s Views on Kingship”. Refer to Works Cited for bibliographical details.

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