



## REINTERPRETATION OF DRAUPADI'S MYTH IN SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S PLAY *WE ARE SO DIFFERENT NOW*

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### ABSTRACT

Myths are important part of any culture and society. Indian scriptures abound in mythological stories which are reinterpreted and revised numerous times by the contemporary writers because these stories are deeply ingrained in the collective unconscious of Indian society and forms the ideological basis of thinking. The epic of *Mahabharata* is among the most powerful and homogeneous discourse of Indian mythology that has always captivated the imagination of Indian and foreign writers. Especially the character of Draupadi from *Mahabharata* has attracted the attention of many writers who reflect on her life which is full of trial and tribulations. The contemporary women writers writing in English, have taken the initiative to reinterpret the character of Draupadi from feminist perspective and to present her in completely different light. These writers try to subvert the stereotyped images of women portrayed in mythological literature.

Shauna Singh Baldwin is an eminent diasporic writer well known for her novels *What the Body Remembers* (2000), *The Tiger Claw* (2004), *The Selector of Souls* (2012) and two collections of short stories - *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1996), *We Are Not in Pakistan* (2007). Baldwin has also written one feminist play *We Are So Different Now* (2009) in which she reinterprets the myth of Draupadi and presents her as a symbol of strength ready to motivate others to learn the value of self respect.

**Keywords:** *Mythology, Reinterpretation of Myth, Draupadi, Feminist Perspective.*

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Indian mythology has been a rich source of inspiration for contemporary women writers writing in English. These mythical stories represent the belief system of any culture. These stories present a traditional culture-specific understanding of any nation. Myths have always captivated the imaginative thoughts of writers and summoned their interpretive capabilities to rework on the traditional ideological structure of society. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the term myth,

A kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms. The term ..., which can be divided roughly into 'rationalist' and 'romantic' versions: in the first, a myth is a false or unreliable story or belief (adjective: mythical), which in the second, myth is a superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding (adjective: mythic). In most literary contexts, the second kind of usage prevails, and myths are regarded as fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity and existence. (Chris Baldick, 235)

Myths are an integral part of Indian culture and society. Indian literary scriptures namely *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Agamas*, *Puranas* and epics *The Bhagwat Gita*, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* abounds in mythological stories and characters and contain the fundamental truths of Hinduism. Definitely, these mythical stories or myths play significant role in defining the power structure of society. As we are talking about Indian myths, they too present mythical stereotyped images of women. The contemporary modern literature attempts to question the stereotyped images of women in mythology and try to subvert the ideological basis of imbalanced power structure. Thus the sacred epics of Hindu mythology are reinterpreted, stories are analyzed, female characters are given voice to question the patriarchal norms, revisionist strategies

are employed so that the readers connect with them in a different way.

The ancient epics present the conventional images of women. The images of Sita, Savitri and Draupadi are deeply ingrained in the social structure of Indian society that they resonate the voices of submission and subordination irrespective of any era. The character of Draupadi from epic *Mahabharata* has attracted the attention of many writers because she is an symbol of endurance and her life is an example of perseverance.

The epic of *Mahabharata* is about the battle of the Pandava and the Kauravs three millennia ago has been interpreted, rescripted countless time that this epic has eventually passed into the Indian psyche and became prominent part of culture and community. There are few contemporary writers in English who have taken initiative and have reinterpreted the myths and made Indian mythology look more plausible. Some of the contemporary literature focusing on the grand epic are - Devdutt Pattanaik's *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (1984), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Sharath Komarraju's *The Winds of Hastinapur* (2013) and some of the plays like *The Mahabharata* (1988) by Jean - Claude Carriere, K.N. Panikkar's *Mahabharata* plays, Shauna Singh Baldwin's *We Are So Different Now* (2009).

Writing in the capacity of Indian diasporic writer Shauna Singh Baldwin's inclination for the character of Draupadi from *Mahabharata* is due to the fact that she is a symbol of strength and one who has endured hardships in her lifetime to maintain her dignity. Shauna Singh Baldwin (born 1962) is a Canadian- American novelist of Indian descent. She belongs to second generation of diasporic writers. Baldwin's creativity as a writer traversed the boundaries thus enriching the experience of readers of three countries - India, Canada and America. Shauna Singh Baldwin is familiar with Indian cultural myths and there effect on Indian psyche as a whole. Having tried her hand in novels and short stories and being successful, she has also written one feminist play *We Are So Different Now* (2009) published in



2011. Shauna Singh Baldwin's engrossment in the character of Draupadi from *Mahabharata* the "Quintessential dark heroine of Indian mythology" (An epic retelling: Akila Kannadasan. Web source) seems to be evoked due to her unconventional life full of vicissitudes. The predicament of Draupadi's life in *Mahabharata* attracts the attention of any writer and Shauna Singh Baldwin is no exception in this regard. Biljana Doric - Francuski, in her article "Woman as Goddess or Woman as Victim? The role of women in the *Mahabharata* and Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*" contained in the book *Literary Location and Dislocation of Myth in the Post colonial Anglophone World*, accounts for the representation of Draupadi's character in various works,

Considered to be the embodiment of femininity," one of the more popular figures in Indian mythology" (Adams David Leeming and Jake page,166) and the most complex character in *Mahabharata*, Draupadi has fascinated numerous authors, who have tried to breath new life into her and re create her story in their own inventive ways. The reason for such interest in Draupadi is probably her highly controversial, ambivalent, and ambiguous personality on the one hand, she is womanly, beautiful, compassionate, brave and generous, on the other she is unforgiving, vengeful and even merciless towards those who have humiliated her, thus exhibiting "resistance to patriarchal domination" (Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, 350). This complexity makes her a suitable character for adaptation and she has therefore appeared in numerous works of Indian and foreign writers. (Francuski,12).

Draupadi's character in that of *Mahabharata* is of traditional Hindu wife, beautiful, calm and docile yet subjected to great atrocities. Draupadi was the beautiful and heroic daughter of Drupad the king of Panchala and the wife and queen of the five great Pandavas. Victim of circumstances she became the common spouse of the five Pandava brothers and humiliated at the hands of Kauravas, she retaliates back with vengeance and anger. Draupadi's life is a saga of hardship and disgrace yet

in strength she is an example of fortitude and bravery. The *Mahabharata* is said to be written around 400BCE by sage Ved Vyas, still the character of Draupadi resonates the life of an average women, bound by the socio-cultural set up of society which relegate women to secondary position and where men always dominate, oppress and exploit women. In the contemporary world the character of Draupadi is reincarnated to challenge the patriarchal system and cultural practices which restrict women to voice their feelings. Shauna Singh Baldwin's play *We Are So Different Now* reinterprets the myth of Draupadi and she is reincarnated as a new woman bold enough to exhibit her discontent towards many injustices she had to face in the name of culture. In the play Draupadi is reincarnated as real woman, still on earth and unable to go to heaven, who lends a helping hand to Sheetal representative of modern Indian woman, to come out of her dilemmas and persuade her not to commit suicide. Draupadi becomes voice of every woman who is bound by the traditional norms of society, who suffer in the name of culture and gender stereotyping. Draupadi advises Sheetal to come out of her fake delusions of society, family and children because she has suffered all this in her life which got her nothing, only humiliation at the hands of patriarchal society. Very aptly Draupadi observes her past life,

Remember me, the woman who rose not from a mother's womb, or her father's desire, but from flickering embers.

I am the woman with the never-ending sari. With my brother, I played chess, moving vazers, ghoras and pyadas across the board.

And in the forest our arrows flew swifter than the wind.

But-unlike my brother - I learned that my words were only for the enchantment of my husbands and Lord Krishna.

My father taught me every guest must be fed from the bounty of the earth I ate.

And my husbands gambled me away along with their kingdom.

(Pause)



My father, my brother, my husbands are long gone. My spirit remains. (Act I Scene I, 13, *We Are So Different Now*)

The words of Draupadi echo in the ears of modern men and women when they learn that how tradition bounds the women and treat them as compliant beings. But now what Draupadi wants from Sheetal is not to be a docile being who conforms to the traditional modes of society. Sheetal is a modern day woman yet her thought reflects the patterns of socio-cultural conditioning which demands from her to be a dutiful daughter, obedient wife and enduring mother. In between all this she forgets the fact that whatever role she plays, her identity is always at stake. When her life began to resonate that of Draupadi, Draupadi sets out to rescue her and encourages her to fight for her rights.

Draupadi makes Sheetal understand that the traditional customs of society hold the freedom of women and they live their life according to the choices made by others. In between her conversation with Sheetal, Draupadi is always articulate about her sufferings and what she has passed through being born as Princess Panchali (another name of Draupadi). At one place Draupadi remarks to Sheetal in the play,

What does it matter what your Daddy expected of you . He doesn't have to live with your husband and family-you do. No one gives you a medal for getting married, you know. Some women marry one husband, some of us have had five. What's so attractive about getting married, I'd like to know? (Act I, Scene I, 9, *We Are So Different Now*)

Through the character of Draupadi, Baldwin wants the world to listen about the predicament of women through centuries. How the power structure of society consider man as superior and woman as inferior being. Reinterpreting the thoughts of Draupadi, Baldwin wants to convey the idea that women suffer because of their socio-cultural conditioning, which makes them think that they are bound to get dictated by the patriarchal structures of society.

Draupadi in the play *We Are So Different Now* is a changed woman. She challenges the

concepts which define women. When Sheetal acknowledges Draupadi's endurance, she boldly asks, Why did I have to endure so much hardship? Who is responsible for my hardships? Nobody asks that! You girls are just supposed to admire my endurance. (Act I, Scene II, 17, *We Are So Different Now*)

When Draupadi talks about the freedom of choice women had during their times in form of Swayamvar, Sheetal shows her the real mirror,

You didn't have a choice, Draupadi Ji ! Everyone knows your father stage managed that Swamyvar so that only Arjun could pass his test. And you were motherless!... no one really cares if you were settled or not. Your father only cared about doing his duty. If you'd remained unmarried after that, he could always say he'd tried. But we are so different now, Aunty ji. We have the benefit of computers. (Act I, Scene II, 19, *We Are So Different Now*).

Draupadi too feels that "In those days a woman belonged to her husband she was a pretty face and a womb, that's all" (Act II, Scene I, 31, *We Are So Different Now*)

It represents the two facets of Draupadi's life one governed by her father and other controlled by her husbands. The little help Draupadi gets is from Lord Krishna who helps her to protect her honour.

Draupadi's endurance is now her strength, her spirit is on earth to help the women who are in despair and do not have control over their life. Draupadi's motivating words helped Sheetal to resist the abuses inflicted on her. Draupadi saves Sheetal from committing suicide and asks her to come out of her depressions. When Sheetal's marriage is on the rocks and she is violated by Arjun's (her husband) cousins, it is Draupadi who asks her to be strong and take the helps of law. Sheetal's life resonate that of Draupadi because Sheetal is at the mercy of her in-laws and husband. Through Sheetal's distress, Draupadi voices her feelings,

Why should someone else confront them for you? can't you talk to your husband? Tell him he needs to do his duty towards you, not just towards his elders, Tell him he can't expect you to take harassment while he sets



quiet. Talk to your cousin-brothers-in-law. Tell them you'll carve them up and eat them for lunch if they misbehave again. Especially that one whose proposal you turned down. (Act II, Scene I, 31, *We Are So Different Now*).

Now Sheetal is a changed woman, ready to fight for her rights and ready to challenge the social and cultural norms which made her life miserable. Draupadi feels for Sheetal "You Are so different now" (Act III, 45, *We Are So Different Now*).

Earlier Sheetal is not able to perform puja for Draupadi due to financial difficulties later on Sheetal tries to arrange puja for Draupadi (which Draupadi wants) so that to send her "atman home to Brahman" (Act II, Scene I, 2, *We Are So Different Now*). But finally Draupadi refuses to leave the world for she feels that,

I still have works to do on earth. You no longer need my help, but other women do. I have to be their fighting spirit- I know that now. (Act III, 47, *We Are So Different Now*).

When Sheetal asks Draupadi that if she is not going to stay with her, where she is going, Draupadi answers,

Where I'm needed most. To women in villages, women in the chawls. There are women and men all over India who are feeling right now, as you felt-total despair. I've been reading reports on the net. - we have a hundred thousand suicides a year. Farmers, unemployed people, retired people. People your age. So many young girls, Sheetal, so many women. (Act III, 47, *We Are So Different Now*).

The play ends with a crucial question Sheetal asks to Draupadi that "... how long it will take to give so many women you fighting spirit? (Act III, 48, *We Are So Different Now*) to which Draupadi replies- "...It could happen tomorrow, or it could happen in the next millennium. You just never know with us Indian women. (Act. III, 48, *We Are So Different Now*).

Shauna Singh Baldwin reinterprets the myth of Draupadi and give her voice to subvert the mythical stereotypes in Indian Literature. The play *We Are So Different Now* is an honest attempt in the part of Baldwin to represent the mythical character

of Draupadi from feminist perspective. Baldwin presents Draupadi as an embodiment of female strength, enigmatic, rebellious at times, a modern woman with questioning spirit and good reasoning. Shauna Singh Baldwin's reinterpretation of myth of Draupadi in *We Are So Different Now* is an outstanding example of her creativity and an effort to subvert the established notions of patriarchy. To Quote Shashi Deshpande in the end,

Myths are still important to us. We do not want to demolish them, we need them to live by, they have shaped our ideas for a great many years, they embody our dreams. To destroy them would be to leave a large dent in the fabric of our culture. On the other hand, if we are not able to make them meaningful to our lives, they will cease to survive. In India, especially myths have an extraordinary vitality, continuing to give people same truths about themselves, about the human condition in general. What woman writers are doing today is not a rejection of myths, but a meaningful and creative reinterpretation of them. We are looking for a fresh knowledge of ourselves in them, trying to discover what is relevant today. (Afterward, *The Stone Women*, 94)

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