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Draupadi: Journeying from Materiality to Liberation

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ABSTRACT

Materialistic quest concerning the school of Lokayata or Charvaka in Hindu philosophy, is the pursuit of worldly desires, pleasures, and happiness, without regard for spiritual or ethical values. (Chattopadhyaya) According to Buddhism, these desires or cravings are the forbearers of dukkha. This signifies that the Attachment to earthly substances, abstract or concrete, binds him like a chain to the worldly sorrows whereas the same attachment to the divinity leads him to the ultimate liberation of his soul, which is called Moksha. It is the ultimate goal of human life which sets one free from the cycle of death, rebirth and the law of cause and effect. The Palace of Illusion is a contemporary retelling of the Mahabharata by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which centres on the protagonist Draupadi. The story presents her life journey, from her childhood to her demise. Her humanness is established with the combination of her virtues as well as follies. Her persistent quest for earthly self-identity and materialistic pleasure turns out to be a mirage at the time of her final time whereas her attachment to Krishna leads her to spiritual liberation.



The paper aims to highlight Draupadi's materialistic quest and its consequences concerning her attachment to Krishna that transcends her spirit and sets her free from all the earthly agony.

Keywords: Draupadi's Materialistic Objectives, Attachment with Krishna, Draupadi's Liberation

Introduction:

What is Materialism?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Materialism as “the belief that money, possessions and physical comforts are more important than spiritual values.” Materialism is a term with wide interpretations. Moral materialism asserts that real happiness can only be achieved by indulging in pleasure and avoiding pain while Philosophical materialism asserts “that the real world is composed exclusively of material things.” (Bunge) Materialism, which is closely related to physicalism, asserts the view that all that exists is ultimately physical. The physicalists include even the non-physical items like biological, psychological, moral, social or mathematical as physical or at least bear an important relation to the physical (Stoljar) Most of the writers agree on its essential characteristic that possessions are central to the lives of materialists. (Fournier and Richins)

Materialistic quest concerning Hindu philosophy is the pursuit of worldly pleasures and happiness, without regard for spiritual or ethical values. It is often associated with the school of Lokayata or Charvaka. Lokayata. It also means the philosophy of worldliness or materialism. (Chattopadhyaya) Some of its distinguishing traits are; that it emphasises on empiricism as a source of knowledge and rejects supernaturalism, favours scepticism over ritualism, and promotes an individualistic way of life that is quite contradicted to the ethical and social norms of the orthodox system. It rejects the existence of the soul, god or afterlife in contradiction to Vedic literature which asserts the existence of supernatural entities, the law of karma and the afterlife. Moksha sets one free from the cycle of death-rebirth and the law of cause-effect. “The perishable are all beings in the material realm. The imperishable are the liberated beings.” (Mukundananda, Bhagavad Gita the Song of God) Realizing one's true



nature and identity with Brahma, the supreme reality is called ultimate liberation, Moksha. (T.N. Sethumadhavan)

Bhagavad Geeta describes the qualities of a person who has liberated his soul, such as being free from attachment, desire, anger, fear and delusion, being content, equal to all, self-controlled and devoted to the Lord. It also shows the way to liberation, “Abandoning all duties, take refuge in Me alone. I shall liberate you from all sins; do not grieve.” (18.66) (Mukundananda, Bhagvad Gita, The Song of God)

The journey of Draupadi’s life is a specimen to demonstrate the process of achieving this supreme intimacy in a very natural manner by attaching herself to Krishna.

Objective and Method

The paper aims to study and analyse Draupadi’s pursuit of earthly love, identity and vengeance in contrast to her attachment to Krishna which helps her not only in the earthly problems but also in achieving the ultimate liberation. ‘Materiality’, would be taken concerning the Lokayat’s school of Hindu philosophy whereas the concept of Moksha is based on Bhagavad Geeta and Vedic philosophy. The qualitative method is implied to study the character and her journey closely. The scope of work is limited to The Palace of Illusion only.

Draupadi in the Mahabharata:

Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata is known by multiple names each displaying her unique identity and characteristics. She is named Draupadi after her father’s name; Krishnaa for her dusky complexion, Yajnaseni- born of the sacrificial fire, Parshati from her grandfather's side, Sairindhiri, the maid servant of the queen Virata, Nitayauvani, (the ever young) and Panchali (having five husbands). (Mostwapong) She is an ideal wife who accompanies her husband not only in good times but also in all their struggle period. Her unflinching courage, moral earnestness and integrity with Krishna added brilliance to the ideals of womanhood in ancient India. (Menon) The projection of her character seems to be influenced by the contemporary patriarchal hegemonic tradition, yet unlike Sita, nowhere do



we witness her as a helpless, submissive, voiceless person. In fact, she seems to be quite ahead of her age as she resembles more to the new woman with her fierce spirit and revengeful nature. Despite such a strong personality, she has been treated as a peripheral character by Ved Vyasa as very little attention is attributed to her voice despite being a victim of endless injustice.

Draupadi in The Palace of Illusion:

She has been reconceived by several writers in Indian English Literature from different perspectives attributing a real voice and identity. She makes Draupadi tell the story of women's sufferings "with all her joys and doubts, her struggles and her triumphs, her heartbreaks, her achievements, the unique female way in which she sees her world and her place in it." (Banerjee Divakaruni) She is a multifaceted woman with human virtues and follies which makes her more complex. She appears fragile as she has been attacked and attempted to be molested several times, yet she possesses a granite will to destroy every hand that touches her with bad intention. She is compassionate at the same time "volcanic to reduce her enemies to ashes." (V Adluri) She is the only one who enjoys the unique relationship of Sakhi (female friend) with Krishna. His presence is noticed throughout her life, especially at an adverse time. Krishna is a friend and philosopher who guides not only in the earthly matter but also in her spiritual journey.

Her Materialistic Attachments

The journey of Draupadi, in the novel, can be described as her quest for self-identity. She rejects being called 'Draupadi' because of its suggestive meaning, 'the daughter of Dhrupad'. She needs a more heroic name, something "more suited to a girl who is supposed to change history?" (Banerjee Divakaruni)

For Draupadi, it is a matter of her self-identity, a self, which is perishable. It is her esteem that she does not like to be remembered as merely a daughter of someone or wife of someone. She wants to leave her foot stamps in the history of mankind. This desire to gain fame and name can be considered as her materialistic desire because it ends with her earthly existence.



Her Desire for Parental Love:

Her Humanistic thirst in 'The Palace of Illusion' is driven by her desire to be loved by her loved ones. As a girl child, she reveals her experience of being deprived of her father's love and family's affection. She misses a mother in her life and fails to trust her father throughout her life due to his initial rejection. She observes that "What my father did not find useful, he removed from his life." (Banerjee Divakaruni) Her conclusion is empirical as Dhruvad uses her daughter to have a powerful ally by arranging her Swayamvar not because he cares for her liking. She also misses the warmth of the family as she and her brother are kept separate from the rest of the family. She is left disappointed as her expectations are never being fulfilled. Thus, the desires and expectations about the earthly objects cause lingering pain only.

Her Inferior Complexity:

As an adolescent girl, it is obvious to be conscious about her looks. Being born out of the fire, she has a dark complexion, resembling Krishna. She also experiences discrimination based on conventional beauty norms. Her inferiority complex is reflected in her reluctance to participate in social gatherings. Her materialistic wish is revealed by her efforts to lighten her skin tone. Once again it is Krishna who boosts her self-confidence. Having a darker complexion than her, he inspires her to come out of such superfluous notions of beauty as he says, "A problem becomes a problem only if you believe it to be so. And often others see you as you see yourself." (Banerjee Divakaruni)

Her Love for Karna:

A princess can have all the luxuries except the permission to love someone. Throughout her life, she runs behind the mirage of her feelings for Karna. Despite her liking, she has to reject him and insult him just to save her brother's life. She keeps bewildered between her infatuation for Karna and her duty as a loyal wife. Her perplexed state of emotions establishes her as a woman of flesh and blood. Her unspoken, unfulfilled love aches her heart till her last breath. This signifies the materiality of her love as it causes pain and not liberation.



Wish for the Palace

The apparent materialistic wish of Draupadi is to own “A palace like no one has ever seen!” “... A palace, which would be the envy of every king in Bharat- a palace of illusion.” (Banerjee Divakaruni) Other human feelings like jealousy and possessiveness can also be seen in her behaviour. She envies her husbands’ other wives and children with those wives, which is the result of her possessiveness. She compares her children with Abhimanyu with a bit of insecurity and jealousy as he is more impressive than her sons. Even her relationship with Kunti, her mother-in-law, is also as universal as it should be, she confesses,

“For by this time Kunti and I... had frozen into our stance of mutual distrust.” (Banerjee Divakaruni) She blames Kunti for pushing her into the awkward situation of polyandry. She complains, “My situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not.” Even though her resentment over being treated as material is one of the reasons for her sufferings, it is futile as it is concerned with her earthly identity.

Her Partiality for Arjun:

Arjun attracts her more than her other four husbands. She wishes Arjun to be her first husband as he is the only one of the Pandavas she feels she can have fallen in love with. She mourns over her situation as she is being gifted by Vyasa the boon of regaining virginity every time she goes to another husband because she feels that this is the boon for the men in her life and not herself. “If the sage had cared to inquire, I’d requested the gift of forgetting, so that when I went to each brother, I’d be free of the memory of the previous one.” (Banerjee Divakaruni) However, she is never been reciprocated by Arjun with the same feeling as she complains, “If he had loved me back, I might have been able to push aside my regrets about Karna and find some semblance of happiness.” (Banerjee Divakaruni)

Aristotle in his most influential work, Nicomachean Ethics wrote about the theory of happiness. According to him seeking pleasure, wealth and a good reputation was the common activity of human beings. ‘To be an ultimate end, an act must be self-sufficient and final “that



which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else” (Nicomachean Ethics, 1097a30-34), and it must be attainable by man.’ (Setton)

Here Draupadi represents the whole human race as she tries to find happiness from the outer world. The real happiness comes out of achieving good virtues.

Her Vengeance:

Draupadi is born out of Drupad’s feeling of vengeance. Her pivot role in the war of Mahabharata is drawn out of her spirit of vengeance. After the dice game and the humiliation she has to face, out of extreme anger and hatred, she takes an oath not to tie her long hair until she oiled it with Duhshasan’s blood. Neither she forgets her oath nor does she allow any of her husbands to forget this. This becomes the only motto of her existence. This way she is established more as a human who is powerless to avoid disastrous war like the Mahabharata. Thus, her strong desire to take revenge earns her bad karma that may act as the cause of her rebirth and as the chain to binds her to this world.

The Transcendence:

Krishna says in the Bagavad Gita that “whosoever attaches their mind to God, also rises from the material to the divine level.” (Mukundananda, Bhagvad Gita, The Song of God) According to Bhakti-rasamrta-sindhu, “One must have a preliminary desire for self-realization. By the slow process of devotional service, under the guidance of the bonafide spiritual master, one can attain the highest stage, being freed from all material attachment and frustrations resulting from void philosophy” (MadhuGopaldas)

Being a human woman Draupadi undergoes all the human emotions, positive as well as negative. But the life loss of the War shook her completely. She is moved by the cries of widows and orphans. They win the battle just to mourn their loved ones. She loses almost all the relations which are dear to her, Dhri, Karna, her sons, Abhimanyu etc. She seems completely changed after the war. She tries to find solace by helping other women and thus indulging herself in karma without having any expectations. Until now she was thinking about herself; now onwards she thinks for others. This is the way to salvation.



Drapadi's Humanity Vs Krishna's Divinity:

Krishna has been her only friend since childhood. Her sceptic mind, a characteristic of Lokayata materiality, does not let her believe him to be God but she does admit that “there was something unusual about him.” (Banerjee Divakaruni) Every time she gets stuck in the odds of life, she remembers Krishna and to her surprise, she finds him nearby out of nowhere. Her honour is rescued at the Kuru court by Krishna due to her absolute reliance on Krishna.

Just knowing and accepting Him as He is, is enough for salvation. She admits that “if my mind believes in Krishna as God, it would bring serenity to my storm swept heart.” (Banerjee Divakaruni) This key to salvation is shown by Lord Krishna in Bhagavad Gita as he says. “Being freed from attachment, fear and anger, being fully absorbed in Me and taking refuge in Me, many, many persons in the past became purified by knowledge of Me- and thus they all attained transcendental love for me.” (MadhuGopaldas)

Her Ultimate Liberation

“When Krishna touches my hand,..something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below. I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable-..beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego.” (Banerjee Divakaruni) This is the state of her mind at the time of her demise. Her memory of Krishna gives her true happiness. She rises above all the earthly pleasures and worries and reaches the realm of Krishna transforming to be an uplifted soul and attaining her ultimate salvation.

Conclusion:

Attachment to worldly objects makes one bound to the world. It captivates the soul while the same attachment with God acts as the key to liberalising the soul from Moh and Maya, the earthly energy of the Lord, and sets one free to become one with the ultimate Tatva and thus rejects all the cause and reason for the next birth. Thus Draupadi's journey in The Palace of Illusion can be taken as a guide for the human being to achieve the fourth and ultimate purusharth of one's life, i.e. Moksha, the salvation, liberation, and enlightenment.



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