



A FEMINIST RETELLING OF DRAUPADI IN KIRAN NAGARKAR'S CUCKOLD

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ABSTRACT:

This study aims to explore the feminist retelling of Draupadi's character in the novel *Cuckold* by Kiran Nagarkar. Traditionally, Draupadi has been presented as a marginalized and disempowered woman who experienced humiliation and vulnerability in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. However, Kiran Nagarkar breaks away from these age-old representations by offering an alternative narrative that foregrounds her agency, strength, and resilience. By employing a feminist lens, the analysis focuses on how Draupadi emerges as a powerful and independent figure in spite of living in a male-dominated society. The novel reinterprets Draupadi's life, relationships, and the challenges she faces in a new light. It critically examines and challenges the constructions of femininity and womanhood traditionally associated with Draupadi. The paper will discuss how the author reclaims Draupadi's voice, transforming her into an emblem of female empowerment and resistance against patriarchal structures. The study investigates the ways in which Draupadi embraces and defies traditional gender roles, critiques societal norms, and exercises her agency. This feminist retelling of Draupadi is an important contribution to contemporary Indian literature, as it provides a platform for the re-examination of traditional narratives from a fresh, empowering perspective. The study highlights the significance of exploring alternative voices and stories in order to break free from the shackles of conventional representations of women in Indian mythology. By doing so, the paper demonstrates the possibilities for creating new spaces for inclusive and diverse portrayals of women in literature, thereby promoting gender equality and empowerment.

KEYWORDS: *Draupadi, Mahabharata, Traditional Outlook, Modern Retelling, Feminist Perspective.*

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The traditional depiction of Draupadi has predominantly upheld her as an obedient and chaste wife, who undergoes several hardships for the sake of her husbands. *The Mahabharata*, for instance, portrays Draupadi as an ideal wife who sacrifices her happiness, desires and even beliefs to conform to the gendered duties and expectations of her society. Her virtuosity lies in her ability to endure the pain and neglect inflicted upon her as a woman, who is at the mercy of the patriarchal society she belongs to. Therefore, the traditional portrayal of Draupadi values her chastity and embodies the ideal of self-sacrifice expected from women. However, the modern Indian writing in English has presented a different and more progressive interpretation of the character of Draupadi. In contemporary Indian English literature, Draupadi has become a symbol of feminine strength and empowerment. Contemporary writers such as Kiran Nagarkar, identified Draupadi's feminist potential and have reimagined her character in new, unconventional ways. In her novel *Cuckold*, Nagarkar portrays Draupadi as a strong-willed and independent woman, who refuses to conform to the expectations of her society. In contrast to the traditional portrayal, the modern reinterpretation of Draupadi's character emphasizes her agency and resilience in the face of adversity. Writers like Nagarkar incorporate Draupadi into their work as a tool for subverting patriarchal norms, and to challenge the idea of womanhood defined solely by relationships to men. It is through her self-awareness, determination and intellectual curiosity that Draupadi transcends the limitations of her society and emerges as a figure of strength and agency.

Draupadi is one of the most enigmatic and complex female characters in Indian mythology, immortalized in the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Her character has been depicted in various ways over the centuries, from ancient texts to modern Indian writing in English. The portrayal of Draupadi in traditional Indian literature and modern Indian writing in English is vastly different. In the traditional portrayal of Draupadi, she is depicted as a symbol of self-sacrifice and feminine virtue. While in the modern reinterpretation of her character, Draupadi embodies a fierce determination to challenge patriarchal norms, and she stands tall as a symbol of feminine strength and empowerment. The difference lies in the way that each society viewed women and their potential, and the desire of contemporary writers to challenge these ideas and re-imagine them in a more feminist light. Ultimately, the evolving portrayal of Draupadi reflects the changing attitudes towards gender roles over the centuries in Indian society. The portrayal of Draupadi in modern Indian writing in English is of immense significance in the context of feminist discourse in India. Draupadi, a character from the ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata* is a revered figure in Indian mythology, known for her virtuosity, courage and sacrificial nature. However, the traditional depiction of Draupadi has often been a subject of criticism by feminist theorists. The traditional portrayal portrays Draupadi as a character who is defined solely by her duty to her husbands, and who is forced to undergo several hardships for the sake of her husbands. The feminist retelling of her character breaks away from these stereotypes and portrays Draupadi as a strong-willed, independent woman, who defies societal expectations and patriarchal norms. One of the central themes in feminist retellings of the story of Draupadi is the rejection of victim-blaming. Traditional portrayals of Draupadi often imply that her fate is the result of her own actions. She is blamed for her swayamvar, for her allure to the many suitors who come to woo her. In contrast, contemporary

Indian writers have re-imagined Draupadi as a character who is wronged by society and its norms. In these retellings, Draupadi is seen as a victim of a patriarchal society that values women only for their acquiescence to men's desires. By salvaging Draupadi's character from victim-blaming, contemporary Indian writers have opened a space to explore women-to-women relationships.

Cuckold is a novel that deals with contradictory perspectives on the position of women in medieval Indian society. Set during the Mughal era, the novel prominently features Draupadi, who is portrayed not just as a tragic heroine but also as a symbol of gender inequality. Through her struggles, Draupadi raises important questions about the theme of equality in gender roles. One of the key aspects of Draupadi's character that underlines the need for gender equality is her agency. Draupadi is self-aware and refuses to accept societal norms that subjugate women to men. She questions patriarchy whenever confronted with it, and her defiance is shown through her resistance against the demands of her five husbands. Draupadi's character reveals how women's rights are curtailed, especially when they are seen as submissive or obedient. Draupadi's agency resonates as a message of empowerment among women, and encourages them to seek equality in all spheres of life.

The novel also explores the theme of gender equality through the critique of the patriarchal norms of marriage. The institution of marriage is presented as a tool that men use to control and oppress women. Draupadi, as a wife of five men, is forced to follow patriarchal codes of conduct that end up restraining her. The limitation on her rights and choices, and the exploitation she suffers at the hands of her husbands, puts forth the detrimental effect of marriage on women, and stresses the need for gender equality in relationships. Moreover, the novel highlights how education empowers women, and can be used as a tool to achieve gender equality. Draupadi is portrayed as a woman who has been educated and is knowledgeable about a variety of subjects. She uses her education to assert herself and fights against the gendered norms prevalent in society. Draupadi's intellectualism becomes a powerful weapon to challenge patriarchy and encourages the need for women's education to break the patriarchal mould.

The depiction of Draupadi and the themes of gender equality in *Cuckold* highlight the struggles that women face in a patriarchal society. The novel emphasizes the need for women's rights, agency, education, and leadership roles to combat gender inequality. Draupadi's character becomes a source of inspiration and empowerment for women, reminding them that they have the power and capability to challenge patriarchal norms, demand equality and live their lives by their own rules. *Cuckold* portrays the theme of equality in gender roles through the character of Draupadi. The novel raises important questions about the position of women in medieval Indian society and emphasizes the need for women's rights, agency, education, and leadership roles to combat gender inequality. Draupadi's portrayal inspires women to challenge patriarchal norms and serves as a reminder that women have the power and capability to live their lives according to their own rules.

Cuckold portrays the subjugation of women through the character of Draupadi. The novel depicts how Draupadi is caught in a web of patriarchy, where she is powerless and subject to the will of men. By examining Draupadi's character and her struggles in *Cuckold*, we can see how her

experiences reflect the larger problem of women's subjugation in a patriarchal society. One of the key aspects of women subjugation in *Cuckold* is the notion of ownership over women's bodies. Draupadi is treated as an object that is owned by her five husbands, who use her as a pawn in their political games. The novel depicts how Draupadi's body is objectified and commodified by men, reducing her to a thing that can be bought and sold. This theme is further explored in the scenes where Draupadi is stripped in front of the court, where she is exposed to public humiliation and she is reduced to nothing more than mere property. The depiction of Draupadi's violation and humiliation highlights how the patriarchal society views the female body as an object that can be used and abused to fulfill the desires of men.

Furthermore, the portrayal of Draupadi's relationships with men reflects the power dynamics in a patriarchal society. Draupadi is subject to the control and dominance of men, including her husbands, who dictate how she should live her life. Draupadi's experiences illustrate how women are expected to be submissive and obedient to men, who hold the power to shape their lives. Even when Draupadi resists her husbands' control, she is still subject to their power and influence. In addition, the novel highlights the theme of women's subjugation through the double standards that exist in a patriarchal society. Draupadi is chained by the expectations imposed on women, such as remaining faithful to her husbands, while her husbands have relationships with other women. The novel depicts how men enjoy the freedom to form multiple relationships while women are expected to remain faithful to their husbands. The double standards that Draupadi faces reveal how the patriarchal society values men over women and reinforces men's sense of entitlement and control over women's bodies.

Moreover, the theme of women's subjugation is linked to the violence and oppression that women face in a patriarchal society. The portrayal of Draupadi's experiences of humiliation, abuse, and degradation highlights the ways in which women are subjected to gender-based violence. The novel shows how women are treated as secondary citizens who are not entitled to the same rights and respect as men. Draupadi's experiences illustrate the pervasiveness of gender-based violence and how it works to reinforce gender hierarchies and women's subjugation. *Cuckold* portrays the subjugation of women through the character of Draupadi. The novel highlights how patriarchy works to reinforce gender hierarchies and maintain men's dominance over women's bodies. The themes of ownership over women's bodies, power dynamics in relationships, double standards, and gender-based violence all contribute to the portrayal of women's subjugation in the novel. These themes reflect the broader problem of women's subjugation in a patriarchal society, highlighting the need for feminist resistance and struggle for women's rights and liberation.

Throughout the novel, Draupadi challenges the traditional gender roles and societal expectations placed on women, showing her desire for equality and justice. By examining Draupadi's character and her struggles in *Cuckold*, we can see how her experiences reflect the broader feminist struggle for women's rights and equality. One of the key feminist themes in *Cuckold* is the concept of women's agency. Draupadi is a character who fights for control over her own life and is unwilling to submit to the norms of the patriarchal society in which she lives. Her refusal to be a passive object is demonstrated when she rejects King Jayamaha's sexual advances

and refuses to become an object of desire for men who wish to control and dominate her. Draupadi's desire for agency highlights the larger feminist struggle for women's choice and control over their own lives. Moreover, *Cuckold* explores how Draupadi's oppression is interwoven with gendered violence. Draupadi faces violence from the men in her society, including her own husbands, who use her as a pawn in their games and subject her to humiliation, both physical and emotional. The novel depicts the consequences of this gendered violence on Draupadi's mental and emotional state. However, Nagarkar also presents Draupadi as a survivor of violence, who fights back and resists her husbands' attempts to control her body and soul. This aspect of her character shows that feminist resistance is possible, even in a society that does not acknowledge women's rights.

Furthermore, Draupadi's character reflects the struggles of gendered discrimination, where women are treated as second-class citizens. Throughout the novel, Draupadi fights against the double standards that allow men to have sexual and emotional relationships with multiple partners, while she is expected to remain faithful to her husbands. Her desire for equality challenges the patriarchal norms, which favor men over women, making her a feminist icon that represents the larger feminist struggle for gender equality. The feminist perspective in *Cuckold* is also seen through the character of Draupadi's relationship with Lord Krishna. She looks to him as an ally, a source of hope, and a rescuer from her precarious situation. However, Nagarkar also portrays him as a patriarchal figure who upholds the same patriarchal norms that oppress women. This portrayal highlights the notion that even within the feminist struggle, there is a need to scrutinize the behaviors and beliefs of male allies, as they can be used to justify and maintain oppressive structures. Through her experiences, Draupadi challenges the traditional gender roles and societal expectations placed on women, and fights for her own agency, equality, and justice.

Although *Cuckold* portrays the oppression of women through the character of Draupadi, it also presents her as a symbol of resistance against patriarchal norms. Throughout the novel, Draupadi exhibits immense strength and resilience as she navigates through a society that seeks to restrain her. Her resistance to patriarchal norms is expressed through her attitude towards her husbands and her ability to stand up for herself, making her a model for women's resistance. The first instance of Draupadi's resistance is seen when she opposes King Jayamaha's sexual advances. Despite being sold off by her father to the king, Draupadi refuses to submit to him, ultimately causing him to face humiliation in front of his people. This scene demonstrates Draupadi's reluctance to become a passive object in a society where women are often treated as disposable property. Furthermore, Draupadi's resistance becomes more apparent when her husbands use her as a pawn in their game of dice. When her honour is put on the line, she resists being disrobed in front of the assembly, calling out to the gods for help. She questions the rules of the game, knowing that they had been rigged, only to be met with silence from her husbands and the men surrounding her. However, her defiance makes an impact, as it prompts Lord Krishna to intervene and save her, restoring her dignity and pride.

Draupadi's resistance continues as she refuses to be silent in the face of injustice, often speaking out against her husbands and the injustices done to her. She questions their actions and beliefs, challenging their oppressive behaviours and ideas. Her resistance is often met with anger

and hostility from those around her, but this does not deter her from fighting for her dignity and rights. Through Draupadi's resistance, Nagarkar highlights the importance of women's agency and the need for them to stand up for themselves. Despite the societal expectations and structures that constrain her, Draupadi refuses to be a victim and instead takes control of her life. The strength and resilience she exhibits in the novel make her a symbol of hope for women facing similar circumstances, showing that it is possible to resist and challenge patriarchal norms. Despite being subjected to the oppressive patriarchal norms of society, Draupadi exhibits immense strength and resilience, challenging the system's injustices and fighting for her rights. She represents a model of resistance and a reminder that women's agency must be acknowledged in patriarchal societies.

Draupadi is first introduced as the ideal woman, who is beautiful, intelligent and virtuous. However, this image rapidly disintegrates as we see how her beauty and intelligence are manipulated and exploited by the men around her. From the beginning, Draupadi's father sees her as an asset to be used to gain power and wealth, selling her off to a wealthy landowner, King Jayamaha. Furthermore, throughout the novel, her five husbands use her in the game of dice, subjecting her to humiliation and abuse in front of a crowded assembly. Draupadi is made to feel like an object throughout the novel. Her worth is measured by her beauty and her usefulness to men. She is never given the freedom to make her own decisions or to have an opinion of her own. Her entire existence revolves around pleasing men and being used by them as a means to their own ends. This is perfectly demonstrated in her husbands' treatment of her throughout the novel. Despite being committed to each of her husbands, she is forced to perform sexual acts with them in front of others, in humiliating circumstances.

In addition to the physical and sexual abuse, Draupadi is also subjected to emotional and psychological abuse. She is frequently mocked, ridiculed and humiliated; her husbands and the men who surround her consistently dismiss her opinions and belittle her ideas. She is constantly reminded of her gender and is told that she is too emotional to make rational decisions. Despite her intelligence and strength of character, Draupadi's voice is never truly heard by any man in the novel. Through the character of Draupadi, Nagarkar reveals the multidimensional nature of oppression that women experience in traditional societies. Draupadi embodies the powerlessness, vulnerability and subjugation that women face in patriarchal societies. The violence and objectification experienced by Draupadi, alongside the disrespect she receives due to her gender, expose the systemic nature of gender-based oppression in *Cuckold*. Her experiences reveal the harsh realities that women face when living in a patriarchal society, where they are systematically oppressed and marginalized. Nagarkar's novel calls on society to acknowledge and challenge the inequalities and oppressive traditions faced by women in India, and the need for gender equality to be a priority.

The portrayal of Draupadi in *Cuckold* evokes several emotions in readers. She is initially introduced as a beautiful and seductive woman who has many admirers. However, as the story progresses, the reader learns that her beauty and sensuality are not of her own making but are a result of societal expectations. She is constantly objectified, and her worth is measured by her beauty and sexuality. Draupadi's oppression is evident in the way she is treated by the men around her. Her husbands, who are supposed to protect and care for her, fail to do so. Instead, they use her

as a pawn to further their own interests. Her desires and needs are eclipsed by their ambitions and ego, and she is reduced to being a means to an end. Moreover, the patriarchal oppression that Draupadi experiences is not limited to her husbands but is pervasive throughout society. Women are treated as subordinates, and their voices are silenced. They are never given equal opportunities, and their worth is continually overshadowed by men. In the novel, Draupadi is subjected to ridicule and humiliation simply because she is a woman. She is often told to be quiet and to not speak her mind, and her opinions are not valued. Draupadi's character represents the struggles that women face in traditional societies. Her experiences illustrate how women are systematically oppressed and how their voices are silenced. The novel highlights how the male-dominated society of India perpetuates gender inequality and how women are often reduced to symbols of male ego. By portraying the character of Draupadi as a victim of patriarchal oppression, Nagarkar raises awareness about gender inequality and highlights the need to empower women.

Draupadi is initially introduced as a seductive and manipulative woman, whose beauty and lure captivates every man who encounters her. However, as the novel progresses, we learn that she is not merely an object of desire but a complex and dynamic character. Draupadi questions traditional norms and refuses to conform to the expectations that society has of her. She is clear about her desires and actively pursues them, even if it means going against societal norms. One of the most significant ways in which Draupadi subverts traditional gender roles is in her relationships with men. While the traditional notions of femininity require women to be faithful and obedient, Draupadi defies these expectations. We see this in the novel when she has multiple relationships with different men, including two husbands, a slave, and other men in her life. She challenges the notion of fidelity that is demanded of women, and instead asserts her own desires and needs.

Another important way in which Draupadi subverts gender norms is through her intelligence and wit. She is shown to be a woman who is brilliant, resourceful, and cunning. She is always one step ahead of everyone around her, and her intelligence is a significant part of her personality. She constantly challenges the patriarchal notion that women are meant to be passive and submissive. Draupadi's character also provides a commentary on the ways in which society treats women. Throughout the novel, we see how women are often marginalized, belittled, and oppressed by men. Draupadi is aware of this reality and uses her intelligence and wit to challenge this. She is resilient in the face of adversity and refuses to be dominated by men. In conclusion, Nagarkar's portrayal of Draupadi in *Cuckold* is a remarkable example of how an established character can be reinterpreted and subverted to challenge traditional notions of femininity. Draupadi's character is complex, dynamic, and intelligent, and she defies societal norms in various ways. Her character provides a commentary on the ways in which society treats women and encourages readers to question traditional notions of gender roles. *Cuckold* is a testament to Nagarkar's ability to reimagine established characters and reinvigorate them to challenge the status quo.

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