

Of Women and Vulnerabilities: Comparisons & Parallels between Draupadi, from Mahabharata and Anne Boleyn, Queen of England (1501/07-1536)

Srija Sanyal

Post-Graduate Student, Department of English

Assistant, Council for Social Development

New Delhi, India

Abstract

From time eternal the role and position of women have attained a room of their own in discussions, analysis and severe debates and controversies. Be it from the pages of history or the culturally rich mythology, women have found themselves at the very heart of every event yet recipients of nothing good that was probably of due to them. The paper is a humble attempt to discuss two such female figures: Draupadi, the fiery female lead in ancient Indian epic Mahabharata, and Anne Boleyn, the infamous Queen and second consort to Henry VIII, King of England (1491-1547). Taking off with a discussion on the link between history and mythology the paper focuses on mirror representation of helplessness of women across national, socio-cultural and historical boundaries, in the context of the role of men in their lives. The paper further highlights how portrayal of female characters have been subjective of men's perspective since ages and how they have been the helpless victims despite being the Queens, irrespective of their national and socio-cultural identity. The aim of the paper further extends to the portrayal of vulnerabilities, anxieties, courage and serenity all being culminated into these two female leads, who in a way, dissolve the distinction between history and myth within them by reflecting the universal condition of women.

Keywords: Draupadi, Anne Boleyn, history, mythology, women

Introduction

“A face that launched a thousand ships.”

(Marlowe, 2005)

Addressed in the context of Helen, the queen of Sparta and later the Helen of Troy from the pages of Iliad - a text which described and shaped both the history and mythology of ancient Greece, the same parallel can be drawn for both Draupadi and Anne Boleyn, who launched greatest carnage in the history of Aryavarta and formation of a separate Church of England, respectively. In both the cases both of the women were involved in something which could not be dreamt of in wildest dream but they turned those dreams into a terrible reality. Nobody could have thought a Catholic king tearing his holy kingdom apart from the spiritual and religious leadership of Rome just in a mere pursuit of a protestant whore; neither anybody imagined that a woman - an epitome of fertility and a nurturing figure can invite a carnage like Kurukshetra war in order to satiate her own thirst for vengeance. Amidst an air of submission where fates of women were decided by the men in their life, both Draupadi and Anne Boleyn emerged as fiercely-independent persona who decided not only their own fate but changed the fates of others around them. The reason for choosing these two female characters for discussion is mainly due to the mirror representation that they reflect in the context of their own respective situations. They are the true faces to the bitter reality that being a woman is always vulnerable whether one is a queen or a minstrel. Having a worth of their own and the driving force behind all the escalation that the men of their lives experienced, they shaped the cultural history of their respective nations. Draupadi and Anne Boleyn, share quite a thing in common despite the geographical and social boundaries between them distancing them apart. One is a sure shot reality, the other might be a product of imagination, yet both rule as the reigning Queens of cultural and historical pages in all their glory. Also known as the Great Tale of Bharata Dynasty, and conceived by greatest of all sages, Ved Vyasa, Draupadi emerges from the fiery flames of Mahabharata, one of the two prime epics of ancient India written in Sanskrit, the other being Ramayana. Contrary to Draupadi, the mythical figure whose existence is still shrouded in mystery and has always been subjective of great debates, Anne Boleyn is a concrete historical figure whose birth date is somewhat foggy. She was the second queen consort of Henry VIII of England, and was the prime force behind the Reformation of England, which resulted into the break of England from the papal authority of Vatican, Rome and the formation of the Church of England as a separate spiritual palace altogether with the king himself as the Head of the Church.

Referring widely to *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Bannerjee Divakurni, and works of Philippa Gregory, the paper focuses on the portrayal of women and their vulnerable positions despite being the most powerful and how history and mythology gets juxtaposed in these two female leads' collective vulnerabilities, anxieties, courage and serenity. The paper aims to draw parallels between Draupadi and Anne Boleyn and reflects on their vulnerability despite being powerful as the universal condition of women that lies beneath the quilt of every civilized era.

History & Mythology: Facets of Cultural Truth

A story is, so we are likely to be told, either true or false. If it is true, it is history, if it is false, it is myth.

(Munz, 1956)

This clear and simple distinction between history and mythology has been there since ages. But what is usually missed is the very fact that they are the two different sides of the same coin. “*Myth and history, in a very special sense, are interdependent* (Munz, 1956).” Which is true in every spirit of its words as both of the elements are integral in shaping the culture of any society, individual or nation. Closely intertwined with each other as if “*they fertilize each other*” (Munz, 1956) history and mythology act as the framework within which a society is known for. For example, in this paper, the story of Draupadi, from Mahabharata, is considered a myth or a part of mythology. Yet it forms an integral part of what Indian culture stands for. Draupadi stands for every woman residing within the geographical boundaries of India, reflecting their anxieties and vulnerability yet courage and serenity, all at the same time. Whereas, Anne Boleyn, is a concrete historical figure with whom women can connect as much as they can with Draupadi. One emerges from the pages of history, while the other emerges from the flames of mythology, yet it is surprising to observe how much these two female figures share in common and also reflects and appeals to the “wo”-mankind in general. The incidents and events related to Anne Boleyn will always have evidences to be backed with yet there always be certain missing links which gets filled in by myths or a mere different assumption of the same event. In literature, the genre of historical fiction is what stands as the most just example of the fact that history and mythology are interdependent. History has always undergone revisions which essentially suggest inclusion of some facts and myths as well. Several works of authors such as Philippa Gregory’s *The Other Boleyn Girl* and *The Boleyn Inheritance* or Hillary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* bears the evidence of histories being dismantled and redefined. Be it *Wolf Hall* or the Tudor series by Gregory all have

explored through the pages of history and have come up with something new with inclusion of some myths to fill in the missing links between the events.

Queens - For Name's Sake Only

A typical unfit in the conventional notion of beauty and feminine nature, the slightly dark-toned Draupadi and Anne Boleyn were successful head-turners with their wit, charm and intellectual intelligence. Indeed, they were mere pawns in a great and larger-than-life political gamble that was going around in the life-stage; a mere actors, yet individuals who simply refused to succumb to the destiny designed for them. An obedient daughter and later wives both retained their individuality in their respective conjugal relationships driving the men around them and not the otherwise which was common at the times.

They were the queens, but for name's sake only. Draupadi was the Maharani in the Palace of Illusions, but always had a competition with the young Subhadra, wife of Arjun apart from Draupadi. Despite Subhadra being her favorite and her own obedience and respect towards all the other wives of her husbands, Draupadi remains a powerless figure as a queen.

"It was a sign against the evil eye... no wonder that for their wives, I was a harbinger of ill-luck, the woman who had torn their husbands from the safety of their homes, a witch who might, with a wave of her hand, turn them into widows."

(Divakurni, 2008)

For the mass, she was the queen who was responsible for their widowhood, a woman because of whom they lost their sons and brothers. While Draupadi thought the common mass would empathies with her for surviving all the humiliation which was definitely not due to her as a woman or as a queen she was shocked to find her being the sign of omen as echoed by one of the women in the camps of battlefield. She lost the status of Maharani or the Chief Queen of Palace of Illusion to Subhadra though she was allowed to always carry the title of Chief Queen of the Pandava princes with herself, yet she again failed as the Queen - the nurturing motherly figure to her subjects - an image substituted by a Queen who harbors a thirst for vengeance even if it is at the cost of several other innocent lives. It was not the same throughout her life though.

"Only my brother that he wanted. Dhri wouldn't let go of me, however, nor I of me. We clung together so stubbornly that my father was forced to pick us both up together."(Divakurni, 2008)

Despite being an unwanted child to her father, Drupad, the king of Panchaal kingdom, she was being provided with education along with her beloved brother Dhrishtadyumna or simply

Dhri, as she likes to call him. She enjoyed a status of Panditayin in her maiden court though often reprimanded by Dhai ma and Drupad himself for not being womanly enough and arguing like a man unlike a shy princess who is supposed to be coy and submissive.

Draupadi, though an unwanted child in the royal household Draupadi was a prodigy of a divine sacrificial fire forcefully delivered to royalty of Drupad and then cautiously offered to be a Pandava bride, i.e., the wife of Arjun, thus gaining both her maiden home and the in-laws home a great ally in each other. She was a royal prodigy with an aura of royalty around her always emphasizing her grandeur - something which she was denied of in her entire lifetime. Anne Boleyn, on the other hand, was the daughter of a commoner, Sir Thomas Boleyn (1477-1539), working in the court of King Henry VIII of England, and was brought up in the French court - a court infamous for its lasciviousness and promiscuity. Despite being a commoner Anne had the royal aura around her. She was the most educated among the ladies-in-waiting of Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536), first wife of Henry VIII, though somewhat pale and dark yet they were with distinctive sharp features and bright eyes which reflected her latent intellect and wit. She was also, the first queen to be beheaded in the history of England. Considered to be the driving force behind the Reformation of England Anne Boleyn surely emerges as a woman ahead of her times with all her stubbornness and arrogance. Being fiercely skeptical and definitely not submissive to either the men of her family or the King himself she skillfully flaunted her French sense of style along with her Protestant religious practices. With a rebel inside her Anne Boleyn invited a lot of change inside the royal chambers of Queen of England. Tyndall's Bible in English, free entry of men from musicians to royal entities along with daily entertainment of dance of music - Anne Boleyn's royal chambers were never quiet, rather it was always a mayday with what she considered as spiritual and intellectual nourishment. A patron of art she invited and encouraged musicians and dancers and poets and who not for display of their talents. Her chambers were like a palace of libertines within the rigidity of royal castle yet untouched by it. Be it reading Lutheran books or a performance of volta to glimpses of courtly love Anne was always encouraging something or the other that was not expected of a woman, especially when she is the reigning Queen of a Catholic nation, which also, happens to be the most powerful nation of the time, and wife of the King who is considered the most appropriate king in the entire Christendom. Anne Boleyn was not a popular Queen; she never was in her entire journey to the throne which she literally captures by replacing Catherine of Aragon, one of the most beloved queens of England.

More of Pawns; Less of Daughters

Both Anne and Draupadi were offered in marital alliance in order to strengthen and escalate others, especially, their own family members. They were the pawns in the ruthless political game - a position which they were quite aware of. They were also aware of what was expected of them. Draupadi was headstrong about the fact that she would be changing the course of the history, and Anne was crystal-clear of the fact that she has to bargain her own position in order to escalate her family to the maximum. And they were indeed successful in their own respective missions. Yet, they failed at the same time as well. They were the reason for their family's gain but they were also the reason for their family's doom. Queens of the most powerful kingdoms of their times yet both were doomed for the positions that they carried with themselves. Queens for names sake only, they never really enjoyed the privileges of their role. With a court to obey them Anne Boleyn, at least, if not Draupadi, was never privileged with a court which respected her. Even Draupadi, for that matter, was disgraced by the mass for drawing the entire Aryavrat to the carnage of Kurukshetra celebrating it as a holy sacrifice essential to avenge her own dishonor in the Assembly Hall.

Role of Men

While literature majorly focuses on the role of woman and her position in the patriarchal domain, Draupadi and Anne Boleyn are two such female figures who cannot be analyzed without approaching the role of men in their respective lives, that too, within the framework of patriarchy.

Both the women were the strong contenders in their own right, who, if played upon precisely, can bring about favorable outcomes. Such was the case with Draupadi who was the best player from the side of both the Pandavas and Drupad. Being the weaving thread between them Draupadi actually untied two of the strongest allies who were, despite being the strongest, were in dire need for each other's' support for their own respective reasons. Anne Boleyn, on the other hand, was a master pawn for hiking the Boleyn family inheritance and for the king; she was an excellent escapee from his ageing queen who cannot bear him a son-something which he desperately desired for.

Being the puppets at the hand of the patriarchy both the women were played upon by their respective male members of the family. Be it her brother, Dhristadumna, or her father Drupad, or her five high and mighty Pandavas, or even Krishna, her all-time companion, Draupadi resided within an arena dominated exclusively by male players. Same is with Anne Boleyn whose voice struck as an unusual one among her uncle, the Duke of Norfolk, her

father, Sir Thomas Boleyn, or her brother, George Boleyn, the Lord Rochford's authoritative tone. But what digresses in the usual representation of the events here is that both of these women simply refused to be mere pawns in a game plan directed by their fathers/brothers. They both were firmly aware of their strengths and weaknesses, thus never faltered when they spoke their minds, which they always did often inviting wrath and trouble from many. Unlike patriarchy ruling over the women, both Anne Boleyn and Draupadi actually ruled over the men around them, despite their life being subjected to the decisions taken by their fathers/brothers/uncles. Both of them were successful in persuading their respective husbands, who were also the kings and thus the most powerful men, to act according to their own perception. They redefined the history and encouraged such events which left a permanent mark on that shaped the culture of their respective societies for the generations to come.

As Divakurni describes in her work *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi was the weaving thread between the Pandava princes binding them together in one single thread. As opposed to the usual perception of the polyandry being an outcome of simple and unintentional mistake in utterance by Kunti, the mother of Pandavas, Divakurni presents the entire event as a cautious decision taken by Kunti in order to assure the unity among her sons. Draupadi became like the charioteer here who knows to tame the wild horses that the Pandava princes are; take the charioteer off the horses and each would aggressively chase their own path fiercely driving in different directions, and thus drifting apart from one another. Her role extended also like that of the mother who would assure the safety of her sons first as she releases her husbands and the kingdom with the two boons granted by blind Dhritarashtra as compensation to the disgrace offered to her in the assembly hall. She was like the child whom all the Pandavas share commonly and cannot deny any of her wishes; it does not matter if that means dipping the entire land into a sea of blood. But more to these she was the woman who became the protector of the men who were supposed to protect her but failed time and again.

Anne Boleyn, on the other hand, was a driving force behind the turbulent times that struck England in 16th century. In Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl*, Anne was not devoid of the flaws that excessive ambition seeds within human soul. Rejected by Henry at first sight Anne was substituted by her sister Mary Boleyn, the more feminine one, who became mistress of the king for a brief time. Being failed in the family mission of capturing the greatest prize Anne was sent back to France in disgrace which made her ambition even more rigid to stand out distinctive from the rest of the Boleyn flock at any cost. With the very first

chance that she got she paved her way through the heart of the king by playing the hard-to-get damsel. Even though Henry was courting Anne for more than six years she was not regarded as his mistress; “*I do not sleep with her*” (Hirst, 2007) as Henry declares to Catherine of Aragon, in the daily show Tudors. Keeping a king’s lust at a bay for such a long time yet making him run behind you like a love-stricken boy was indeed an achievement that Anne had managed to seal on her own merit. Fully aware of her worth she managed to gain the maximum for the Boleyn family as well as for England by giving birth to her daughter, Elizabeth I of England (1533-1603), the Gloriana. Convincing the king of Protestant and Lutheran beliefs as Duke of Norfolk, her uncle says “*he takes his religion from his wives*”(Gregory, *The Boleyn Inheritance*, 2006), Anne was also the driving force behind the Protestant movement that was gaining its momentum in 16th Century England. Ironically, like Draupadi, Anne was the one who was the main reason for Boleyn family’s escalation of wealth and also of the reputation among the royals. Despite their respective fathers laying the foundation for the same both Anne and Draupadi were quintessential for strengthening the ties and position of their respective families, especially that of the male members. Making the king succumb to her individual perception, Anne definitely emerges as not only a headstrong woman but also an individual being aware of her worth and role in the world.

One feels at a loss of words while discussing the role of men in the context of these two female figures from the pages of history as they themselves capture the entire discussion with their respective individual glory. It was not only the husbands and the kings that were being ruled by these women; it was actually the patriarchy that was being ruled by these women. In a way it was the patriarchy that succumbed to the rules of these women.

“*What matters is that one of us catches the king. It hardly matters which one.*”

(Gregory, 2001)

The Boleyn family, or rather the Howards – the fiercely ambitious Howards, headed of Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Howard, had not planned beyond making girls after girls the mistresses of the royals, the king, among all of them being the greatest prize like a jackpot to capture. The stock is always full and there are always plenty ready to be served on the platter. But Anne Boleyn, the more unfeminine one of the family, is the one who actually broke this usual and “mundane” game plan by not succumbing to be the royal mistress, even if it’s the king himself. “Queen or nothing” that was Anne’s demand to the love stricken Henry which resulted in the Boleyns becoming the official royals – they are the closest kin to the Queen of

England, and therefore the most powerful in the kingdom. And all this because of a woman!!
– who now stands superior to them.

Conclusion

Playing with the passions of the king, Anne was actually playing with the fire itself which burnt her to the ashes. Regarded as king's whore in her entire lifetime and often as the witch, Anne drew her entire family and kingdom to a great extent into her own doomed fate. Much like Draupadi, whose family was killed in the greatest of great battle, including her five sons, both of the women have much in common between them despite the cultural distance:

- Queens but never really enjoyed the status and reputation
- Beloved daughters yet reduced to mere pawns
- Had to face humiliation for being referred to as a concubine; Anne Boleyn was infamously known as the King's whore and Draupadi was explicitly humiliated in the assembly hall as whore and time and again she has been mocked for her "unusual" arrangement of marriage."
- Were the most powerful women yet were helpless in their positions
- Were responsible for benefits of their respective families yet drew the same family to downfall along with their own

In a way, these two women blur the line between truth and fiction, between myth and history, by reflecting the bitter truth of women's vulnerability that continues to run through every culture in every era. They further represent the unfortunate fact that be it a queen or a commoner one is bound to be vulnerable in some way or the other the moment the one is born as "wo"-man. Standing at the verge of nothing as daughter, wives, and mothers, Anne and Draupadi, at the same time, are the representative of feminine courage and strength that is ruthless yet sublime. Martyr in their own rights, they are the figures where all the feminine traits – usual and unusual both, gets submerged in eternity, and thus, shining in its glory, carefree of any history or mythology as understood and defined by this mortal world.

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