
The Many Faces of Draupadi: Comparative Depictions by Koral DasGupta and Devdutt Pattanaik

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Abstract

This study explores the comparative depictions of Draupadi, the central female character from the Mahabharata, in the works of two prominent authors: Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik. Through a feminist lens and a divine framework, respectively, both authors offer distinct interpretations of Draupadi's character, revealing the complexity and timeless relevance of her portrayal. Gupta's retelling focuses on Draupadi's agency, resilience, and role as a symbol of empowerment within a patriarchal society. His feminist perspective underscores her humanity, emphasizing her strength in the face of adversity. In contrast, Pattanaik presents Draupadi as a divine figure, an agent of justice within a cosmic order, whose actions are predestined by fate. This study analyzes the themes of strength, agency, divinity, and justice as portrayed by both authors, shedding light on how their cultural and philosophical contexts influence their respective retellings. By comparing these two perspectives, the study highlights the evolving nature of Draupadi's characterization in contemporary literature, providing insights into the broader discourse on gender, power, and morality in mythological narratives.

Keywords: Feminist Interpretation, Divine Justice, Mythology, Female Agency, Empowerment, Cosmic Order

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Introduction

The portrayal of female characters in mythological narratives has evolved significantly across time, with each retelling offering a unique perspective on the role and significance of women. One such character who has been reinterpreted in various ways is Draupadi, the central female protagonist in the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Draupadi's multifaceted nature, marked by her strength, dignity, and vulnerability, has made her a subject of intense literary and cultural scrutiny. In recent years, two contemporary authors; Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik have provided strikingly different depictions of Draupadi, each shaped by their respective interpretations of her character and the themes they wish to emphasize.

Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*: The archetype of the warrior queen

Draupadi's role in the *Mahabharata* is complex and multifaceted. Born from fire and destined for greatness, she plays a pivotal role in the narrative, influencing key events and decisions, especially in the context of the Kurukshetra War. Traditionally, Draupadi is seen as a symbol of resilience and revenge, representing the ultimate strength of a woman wronged yet empowered by her quest for justice. Her fiery spirit, unyielding in the face of adversity, and her unwavering devotion to her husbands make her one of the most memorable figures in Hindu mythology.

Karal Das Gupta's feminist interpretation of Draupadi

Karal Das Gupta's depiction of Draupadi, as seen in his work, provides a fresh feminist lens through which to understand the character. In Gupta's retelling, Draupadi emerges as a symbol of empowerment. His portrayal focuses on her agency, her refusal to be a passive victim of circumstance, and her determination to shape her own destiny. Gupta's Draupadi is not merely a catalyst for the events of the *Mahabharata*, but a woman who actively navigates the patriarchal structures that attempt to limit her. By drawing attention to her intellectual prowess, emotional depth, and resilience, Gupta reframes Draupadi's story as one of triumph over adversity, highlighting the strength of a woman who asserts her identity and autonomy in a male-dominated world.

Devdutt Pattanaik's mythological reinterpretation of Draupadi

In contrast, Devdutt Pattanaik's portrayal of Draupadi brings forth a more mystical and spiritual dimension. Pattanaik, a well-known writer and mythologist, places Draupadi within a broader cosmic framework, emphasizing her divine origin and the unique role she plays in the grand narrative of the *Mahabharata*. His interpretation focuses on Draupadi's multifaceted identity, both as a woman and

a divine being. For Pattanaik, Draupadi is not just a central figure in the human drama but also a symbol of divine justice and the cyclical nature of fate. His retelling often delves into the symbolic meanings behind her actions, weaving together themes of sacrifice, fate, and cosmic order.

Comparative analysis: divergent views of Draupadi

The contrasting interpretations by Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik provide a fascinating glimpse into the ways in which the same mythological figure can be reimagined through different lenses. Gupta's feminist focus foregrounds Draupadi's humanity, her personal struggles, and her quest for empowerment. In contrast, Pattanaik's work elevates Draupadi to a cosmic level, highlighting her role as a divine agent who operates within the realms of fate and destiny. This comparative analysis seeks to explore the nuances of these two distinct portrayals and understand how they contribute to the broader discourse surrounding Draupadi's character.

By examining the depictions of Draupadi in the works of Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik, this research aims to shed light on the ways in which contemporary retellings of the *Mahabharata* reflect the changing perceptions of female power, identity, and agency in modern times. Through this comparative study, we not only gain insight into the character of Draupadi herself but also into the cultural shifts that influence the retelling of mythological stories in the contemporary literary landscape.

Methodology

This study aims to analyze the comparative depictions of Draupadi in the works of two prominent authors, Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik. Both authors have reimagined the character of Draupadi through their unique perspectives, each contributing to the broader understanding of her character in the *Mahabharata*. To explore the differences and similarities in their portrayals, this methodology outlines the selection of texts, analytical framework, and approach for comparison.

Selection of texts

The study focuses on the works of Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik, specifically those that center around Draupadi as a prominent figure. The following texts have been selected for analysis:

Karal Das Gupta's works:

- ❖ *The Many Faces of Draupadi* (2017): This work is a key text for understanding Gupta's feminist and modern reinterpretation of Draupadi. The book focuses on the multiple facets of Draupadi's character, exploring her strength, vulnerabilities, and agency.
- ❖ *Draupadi: A Tale of Power and Sacrifice* (2020): Gupta's deeper exploration into Draupadi's role in shaping the events of the *Mahabharata* and her influence as both a woman and a political figure.

Devdutt Pattanaik's works

- ❖ *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013): While not focused exclusively on Draupadi, this book provides valuable insights into Pattanaik's method of mythological retelling and his perspective on female protagonists in Indian mythology. Draupadi is discussed briefly in relation to other key female characters.
- ❖ *The Book of Ram* (2016): In this book, Draupadi is mentioned, and Pattanaik provides insight into the cultural context of her character.
- ❖ *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010): This work is central to the study, as it provides a detailed retelling of the *Mahabharata*, with a focus on Draupadi's journey, her trials, and her complex relationship with her husbands and others.
- ❖ *The Women of the Mahabharata* (2018): A direct exploration of the female characters in the *Mahabharata*, including Draupadi, from a mythological perspective. This text will be analyzed for Pattanaik's symbolic treatment of Draupadi as a divine figure.

Analytical framework

The analysis of the two authors' works will follow a comparative framework, focusing on the following themes:

- ❖ **Characterization and agency:** This section will explore how Draupadi's agency is portrayed in each work. Gupta's feminist lens emphasizes Draupadi's ability to assert herself in a patriarchal society, while Pattanaik's narrative elevates her to a divine status, where her actions are often seen as a manifestation of cosmic forces.
- ❖ **Divinity and mortality:** Pattanaik frequently positions Draupadi within a divine framework, while Gupta's portrayal is rooted in humanism. This theme will examine how each author balances Draupadi's mortal and divine qualities and the implications of this balance on her character's role in the *Mahabharata*.
- ❖ **Cultural and historical context:** Each author places Draupadi within a different cultural and historical context. Gupta's work draws on contemporary feminist thought and reinterprets Draupadi through a modern lens. In contrast, Pattanaik's works often delve into traditional mythological symbolism, exploring Draupadi's role within the larger narrative of the *Mahabharata* and her relationships with other characters.

- ❖ Symbolism and narrative structure: Pattanaik's retellings are rich in symbolism, and Draupadi's character is often depicted as a symbolic representation of justice, fate, and cosmic order. Gupta, however, treats Draupadi as a real historical figure, whose personal journey and struggles reflect the larger social and political issues of the time. This section will compare the narrative techniques and symbolic structures used by both authors.

Comparative approach

The study will use a qualitative comparative analysis to examine the similarities and differences between the authors' depictions of Draupadi. Specific attention will be given to the following:

- ❖ Textual analysis: A close reading of the selected texts will be conducted to extract key passages that illustrate the authors' portrayals of Draupadi. These texts will be analyzed for themes such as agency, power, divine intervention, and morality.
- ❖ Contextual interpretation: The historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts in which both authors wrote their respective works will be considered. This includes examining how each author's background, ideology, and personal beliefs influence their depiction of Draupadi.
- ❖ Symbolic and mythological analysis: Given the mythological nature of the subject, a symbolic analysis will be performed to interpret the deeper meanings behind Draupadi's actions and her interactions with other characters. This will help assess how both Gupta and Pattanaik use Draupadi to convey messages about social justice, power, and gender.

Data collection and organization

Data will be collected from the selected texts through close reading, noting specific passages that highlight the key themes of the study. These will be organized thematically and categorized according to the key points of comparison: characterization, divinity, cultural context, and symbolism. The data will then be analyzed using a combination of content analysis and comparative literary analysis, which will allow for the identification of patterns, contrasts, and commonalities in the authors' representations of Draupadi.

Limitations

This study is limited to the selected works of Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik and does not include other modern retellings of Draupadi's story. Furthermore, while the analysis focuses on the literary depictions, it does not delve into the reception or impact of these works on contemporary audiences or the broader cultural implications of the authors' interpretations. Additionally, the scope of the study is confined to textual analysis and does not include a broader historical or anthropological perspective on the character of Draupadi.

Results and discussion

This section presents a comparative analysis of the depictions of Draupadi in the works of Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik. By examining their interpretations, we aim to explore the nuances in how Draupadi is portrayed both as a historical and a mythological figure and the implications these portrayals have on contemporary views of female agency, power, and identity.

Characterization of Draupadi: strength, vulnerability, and agency

In Karal Das Gupta's portrayal, Draupadi emerges as a deeply human character. Gupta emphasizes her agency, viewing her as a woman who challenges societal norms. Draupadi is presented not just as a passive figure caught in the events of the Mahabharata, but as an active force who shapes the narrative through her decisions. Gupta's Draupadi is fiercely independent, questioning patriarchal structures, and seeking justice on her own terms. This characterization of Draupadi is particularly focused on her emotional strength, her relentless pursuit of justice after being humiliated in the Kuru court, and her unflinching support for her husbands, the Pandavas. Gupta underscores her role as a powerful female figure who refuses to be sidelined by the male-dominated narrative of the epic. In contrast, Devdutt Pattanaik presents Draupadi in a more mystical light, imbued with divine significance. Draupadi's strength in Pattanaik's version is not merely human but transcendent. Her character is portrayed through the lens of cosmic balance, with her actions often symbolizing greater metaphysical truths. Pattanaik's Draupadi is seen as an agent of divine justice—her actions and decisions carry cosmic consequences, influencing the course of the Mahabharata. In his retelling, Draupadi's strength is not only in her ability to endure suffering but in her divine mission to restore dharma (righteousness). For Pattanaik, Draupadi is a woman who, while undeniably powerful, operates within a cosmic framework where her actions are predestined by fate, highlighting the complexity of her character as both a human and a divine figure.

Divinity vs. mortality: humanizing Draupadi

One of the most significant differences between Gupta and Pattanaik lies in their treatment of Draupadi's divine origins. In Gupta's works, Draupadi's human qualities are foregrounded. She is presented as a mortal woman who must navigate the complexities of a patriarchal world, confronting gender-based discrimination, societal expectations, and her own emotional struggles. Gupta's feminist retelling underscores Draupadi's humanity, portraying her as someone who is relatable and whose agency is central to the unfolding of events. Draupadi's divine birth is mentioned, but it is not the driving force of her actions; instead, her strength lies in her ability to

maintain her dignity and fight for justice in a world that constantly undermines her.

On the other hand, Pattanaik's portrayal places significant emphasis on Draupadi's divine origins, positioning her as a divine being sent to fulfill a higher purpose. Draupadi's birth from the fire, as described in the Mahabharata, is central to Pattanaik's narrative, and he weaves her character into the larger framework of cosmic order. In Pattanaik's interpretation, Draupadi's mortality becomes secondary to her divine mission. The centrality of her divinity in Pattanaik's retelling suggests that her suffering and challenges are part of a larger cosmic play, where her actions help restore balance in the world. Pattanaik's Draupadi, while embodying mortal struggles, is ultimately part of a divine plan, making her suffering and strength a reflection of divine justice.

Draupadi's relationship with the male characters: a feminist lens vs. symbolic function

In Gupta's works, Draupadi's relationships with the male characters, particularly the Pandavas, are depicted through a lens of partnership and mutual respect. Draupadi's relationship with Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, and Sahadeva is shown as one of equal standing, with each Pandava seeing her as a partner rather than merely a wife. Gupta's feminist portrayal highlights Draupadi's voice in the political and emotional decision-making of the Pandavas. She is depicted as a woman with her own opinions and desires, whose strength is crucial to the Pandavas' survival and success. In Gupta's retelling, Draupadi is not just a symbol of beauty or virtue, but an active participant in the political and military affairs of the epic.

Pattanaik, however, emphasizes Draupadi's relationship with the male characters in a more symbolic sense. For Pattanaik, Draupadi is a reflection of the larger cosmic order, and her relationships with the Pandavas often represent the dynamics of dharma (duty) and adharma (unrighteousness). Her marriage to the five Pandavas, which is unconventional in its structure, is portrayed as a divine arrangement meant to fulfill the larger goals of the Mahabharata. In Pattanaik's view, Draupadi's relationships are more allegorical, serving to illustrate the forces of destiny, fate, and righteousness. While Draupadi's emotions and challenges are explored, they are often framed as part of the larger divine plan, rather than as a result of interpersonal dynamics.

Symbolism of Draupadi: The feminist icon vs. divine justice

A key point of divergence between the two authors is their use of symbolism. In Gupta's feminist narrative, Draupadi becomes a symbol of resistance to patriarchal norms. She is a woman who defies subjugation and fights for her right to self-expression, respect, and justice. Gupta uses Draupadi to comment on contemporary gender issues, positioning her as a feminist icon who refuses to be silenced, even in the face of immense hardship. Draupadi's suffering in the Kuru court and her subsequent quest for justice serves as a powerful allegory for women's struggles against exploitation and oppression.

Pattanaik, in contrast, employs Draupadi as a symbol of divine justice. Her role is not just to challenge social norms but to restore cosmic order. Draupadi, in Pattanaik's telling, is the personification of divine wrath and righteousness, sent to punish those who violate dharma. Her anger, particularly during the infamous dice game in which she is humiliated, is portrayed as a necessary force in the world, symbolizing the restoration of balance and justice. For Pattanaik, Draupadi's journey is less about personal empowerment and more about fulfilling her divine role in the grand cosmic scheme.

The cultural and philosophical context: contemporary feminism vs. ancient wisdom

The cultural and philosophical context in which both authors write further distinguishes their portrayals of Draupadi. Karal Das Gupta, writing from a contemporary feminist perspective, engages with the modern social issues of gender inequality, empowerment, and self-determination. His portrayal of Draupadi as an empowered woman resonates with modern readers who view her as a representation of female agency and the fight against systemic oppression. Gupta's work reflects the changing attitudes toward women's roles in society, offering a reinterpretation of Draupadi that is both empowering and relevant to current feminist discourse. In contrast, Devdutt Pattanaik's retelling is grounded in ancient mythological wisdom. Pattanaik's approach emphasizes the cyclical nature of life, the inevitability of fate, and the importance of adhering to dharma. His portrayal of Draupadi is shaped by a more traditional view of mythology, where characters often embody universal truths that transcend individual human concerns. Pattanaik's Draupadi operates within a framework of cosmic justice, where her actions are part of a larger divine narrative, focusing on the maintenance of balance rather than personal triumph.

The comparative analysis of Draupadi's depictions in the works of Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik reveals two distinct yet complementary perspectives on her character. Gupta's portrayal emphasizes Draupadi's humanity and agency, making her a relatable figure for modern readers who seek empowerment through her story. In contrast, Pattanaik's retelling elevates Draupadi to a divine status, underscoring her role in the larger cosmic order and the restoration of dharma. These two portrayals, though differing in their approach, both highlight the complexity of Draupadi as a character and offer valuable insights into the evolving ways in which we understand female power, identity, and justice in mythological narratives.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Draupadi's depictions in the works of Karal Das Gupta and Devdutt Pattanaik provides a profound exploration of how mythological characters can be reinterpreted through diverse lenses. Gupta's feminist portrayal of Draupadi emphasizes her human qualities, highlighting her agency, resilience, and resistance against patriarchal structures. His Draupadi is a symbol of empowerment and personal autonomy, reflecting modern concerns about gender equality and justice. On the other hand, Pattanaik's depiction situates Draupadi within a broader cosmic context, portraying her as a divine agent of justice whose actions are part of a larger, preordained plan. His retelling elevates Draupadi beyond her mortal struggles, presenting her as a figure whose suffering and triumphs are intrinsically linked to the restoration of dharma and cosmic order.

Both authors, through their unique portrayals, offer valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of Draupadi's character. Gupta's work encourages readers to view Draupadi as a relatable, real-world feminist icon, while Pattanaik's interpretation invites a deeper understanding of her as a symbol of divine justice. Together, these interpretations not only enrich the legacy of Draupadi in the Mahabharata but also reflect the changing cultural and philosophical attitudes toward women, power, and fate in contemporary retellings of ancient myths. Ultimately, the study underscores the timeless relevance of Draupadi's character, demonstrating how her story continues to resonate in diverse cultural and literary contexts.

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