

The Female Body and Public Shame: A Gender-Based Interpretation of Sita's Agnipariksha and Draupadi's Vastraharan

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Abstract: What happens when a woman's shame becomes the site where a community measures its honour? This paper examines Sita's Agnipariksha and Draupadi's Vastraharan, which are perhaps two of the most debated episodes in the two major epics—Ramayana and Mahabharata—to consider how the female body in public emerges as an object of voyeuristic scrutiny and moral regulation. Far from mere myths, these tales reverberate into the present and tell stories of women in contemporary contexts. Drawing on feminist perspectives, cultural analysis, and the work of scholars such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Hildebrandt, the study reveals how shame functions as a patriarchal tool for disciplining, punishing, and silencing women. What Sita's trial demonstrates is the internalization of virtue through compliance, while Draupadi symbolizes rebellion; however, both are trapped within structures of domination. The paper also situates these ancient stories in the modern contexts of shame-based violence, including honour killings, victim shaming, and representative portrayals of the 'perfect woman'. Using today's lens, the current study raises awareness of the fact that "These epics should be used to challenge rather than perpetuate the culture that depicts women as happy to be abused and men as defenders of this tradition" (Ahmed 2021).

Keywords: Gender, Public Shame, Sita, Draupadi, Agnipariksha, Vastraharan, Patriarchy, Feminist Theory, Purity, Honour

Introduction

Controversial discussions regarding depicting women characters have frequently been held, in which characters from the Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are considered. These two great characters have a degrading treatment—Sita through an Agnipariksha (ordeal by fire) and Draupadi through Vastraharan (disrobing of her dignity) in the Kaurava court. Paranoias also inform the two tales of male concern with the sexuality of the female characters, which they regard as 'pure,' 'honourable' and autonomous. While Sita's trial is to prove her purity to society, Draupadi's humiliation is the strategy to domesticate her. In this paper, these narratives are analyzed with a specific focus on the gender aspect, and how the concept of public shame is employed to strengthen the male authority over women in the context of traditional patriarchal culture in conocer. The two epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, are considered the two major sources of information under the Indian literary and religious streams, which have generated social norms for centuries. Both Sita and Draupadi of these epics are the symbols depicting tried and tested

attitudes towards gender and gender roles in Indian culture. Sita's character, portrayed as an 'ideal' woman, is humiliated, tested, and tortured with references to her character that question her purity and loyalty, thus giving a depreciative image of women as chaste property whose worth is only as good as their virginity. Draupadi, on the other hand, is depicted as a woman of substance with a spirit to fight for what she believes in, but again, she is also a victim of a patriarchal structure. They portray how women embrace and are contained according to patriarchal concepts of femininity and womanhood.

Both Sita and Draupadi represent the female virtues and honour in the public domain, and thus, the emphasis on the performativity of these concepts is brought to the foreground. They not only endure their experiences, but also these experiences are revealed to kings, sages, and even the complete assembly. Organized female suffering exemplifies society's structure, as their suffering is on full display, so there will be reinforcement of women's confinement and reinvention of their roles so that they do not deviate from the expected norm. Whether or not their suffering is accepted by protagonists of the epics also shows that women of the epics are also doomed, more or less, by patriarchal culture, and their agency is subjugated all the time. Shame, especially when inflicted on women, is a phenomenal tool of power that has the role of regulating the behaviour of the female population. Male authority is made to triumph over Sita and Draupadi through the usage of shame in both epics. This seems to be a general culture of women where they are associated with honour and dishonour; hence, their actions are monitored closely. Looking at these examples through the lens of both feminism and psychoanalysis, this paper seeks to determine the current standing of these old narratives regarding gender and subjugation.

However, what is important and concerning in such narratives is that these are not just prehistoric folk tales but are relevant to the modern point of view on women. "The aspect of honour, shame, and purity continues to feature in the current cultural context in questions like moral policing, victim shaming, and the perpetration of gender-based violence"(Banerjee 58). How these epics are recast deeply affects the portrayal of women's agency and their role in determining their future in the South Asian nations. Hence, it can be concluded that studying Sita's Agnipariksha and Draupadi's Vastraharan does not merely remain a theoretical endeavour, but it fulfils the current forays of power of gender and femininity.

It is also important to note that such texts have been covered in different ways in a bid to present views that may differ from what the ancient texts depict. "Even in the Feminist narratives, the literature of the modern period and movie industry efforts have tried to represent Sita and Draupadi as empowering rather than helpless characters"(Menon 2022). These realignments give new ways of viewing and interpreting the issues of female roles in history and the present epoch. Therefore, although the Ramayana and Mahabharata as epics contain elements that endorse patriarchal norms in traditionally misogynistic ways, the changing rendition of these epics provides an opening to reconstruct the lost/forgotten women's passages.

1. The Cultural Context of Female Honour and Shame

The honour of ancient Indian women rested purely on their sexual purity and willingness to obey men. The patriarchal orders of their respective universes determine the value of Sita and Draupadi as male needs dictate their status. Gender norms receive moral reinforcement through women's experiences of suffering, according to Alf Hiltebeitel's academic perspective (Hiltebeitel 217). "Sita and Draupadi experience pain

because their bodies serve as domains where men compete for dominance and exercise social power over women"(Sharma 122).

Society views honour as a communal priority rather than an independent trait that belongs to women in these narratives. Judith Butler (1990) establishes in *Gender Trouble* that gender identity develops from recurring performative behaviours that society requires in accordance with social norms. A woman's purity acts as the key indicator for the reputation of her family, community, and her kingdom. Any perceived violation of a woman leads to harsh punishments that extend beyond the woman to affect the entire network of people associated with her. The belief that women's honour belongs to their community has provoked historical instances of honour killings and social rejection for noncompliant female behaviour. The epics establish that male authority defines a woman's honour through the bestowment of honour by husbands, along with fathers and kings. Sita faces doubts about her purity, even though she shows absolute loyalty, and yet she only receives value from Rama based on his reactions to her. Here, there is no regard for the freedom of choice, especially when men in the Kauravas' court are determining the fate of Draupadi. The fact is that patriarchy as a structural privilege erases women's agency across patriarchal systems. The epics show that public shaming functions as a serious threat against women who seek to keep control of their existence.

"Gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be."
(Butler 34)

Through both stories, the epics demonstrate the status of Sita alongside the storytelling about Draupadi to educate future women about how breaking social customs brings negative consequences. Traditional women who challenge beliefs will suffer disgrace and pain as a deterrent for other women to avoid such conduct. Society still maintains anxiety about public disgrace, demonstrated through traditional social rules that control women's freedom of choice. The duality of honour-shame has thus firmly established its place in mythology and the living culture of the South Asian sectors. "Patriarchal tendencies that are reflected in these epics continue to shape modern culture in such a way that women experience purity tests and limitations on their mobility"(Gilligan 2018). That is why the modern world practices victim-shaming to the extent that it imposes similar expectations on Sita and Draupadi by blaming the victims of their attackers and asking them to explain themselves.

The oppressive systems of honour and shame fail to diminish Sita and Draupadi because they both discover means to fight back through proactive behaviour. When Sita makes her departure, she overrides judgmental social commentary, yet Draupadi fights back by challenging her persecutors to obtain justice while resisting shame. Historical women have found the motivation to fight patriarchal norms because of their systematic resistance, even when operating under restrictive circumstances. The stories in these epics show that women have dual roles as honour-bearers and heroes who demonstrate great strength, which resonates with contemporary times.

"The body is directly involved in a political field."(Foucault 25)

2. Sita's Agnipariksha: A Test of Purity

After being abducted by Ravana, Sita undergoes her Agnipariksha according to Valmiki's *Ramayana*. "If my heart has never swerved from Rama, may Agni protect me."Valmiki, *Ramayana* 6.116). Despite her constant chastity and loyalty toward Rama, Sita faces dubious scrutiny about her purity when she returns to Ayodhya. A divine confirmation of her purity emerges from her trial by fire, which proves her faithfulness to Rama. The need for such a test exposes the amount of deeply established patriarchal thinking

that declares that a woman's worth only exists through proving she remains sexually pure rather than recognizing her moral or personal independence (Doniger 2010). Sita's trial exemplifies the broader social and political system through which women's honour becomes established only by public observation of their suffering. Through this public test, the authors emphasize a communal ownership of women's bodies since the collective concern for their honour transcends their right to personal autonomy. The passing of Sita's Agnipariksha does not protect her from being sent into exile, which demonstrates how society's judgments take precedence over personal facts. The Agnipariksha presents itself as a supernatural method for truth verification, yet it challenges whether the parties involved can maintain control and consent. Sita is forced to prove her purity because that's society's requirement to accept her. By forcing women to demonstrate this way, patriarchy limits women to essentially two choices: surrender or be kicked out of their communities.

"No one can judge my purity except myself." (Divakaruni 340)

Sacred Agnipariksha sees divine confirmation as crucial to proving that the wife is pure because it implies that human judgment is not sufficiently authoritative, resulting in the limited voice that Sita has in her validation. This long tradition of telling the story of Sita's dramatic life has helped shape basic ideas of womanhood in the South Asian cultural universe. Suffering has been valorized as a virtuous cultural practice in writings and religious texts, and it has become a domain of society-wide beliefs on how women should act. The history shows how women have always had to exercise their purity to be under trial; Sita faced these burdens. But such narratives tell how gendered double standards still make the notions of purity, honour, and the idea of sexual morality in present times.

The Agnipariksha of Sita, combined with her subsequent banishment, puts the independent decision-making ability of female epic characters into question. However, her character is portrayed as righteous and pure; her liberties are continuously overruled by the male authority, initially by Rama and then by society. Although she escapes the flames and is proven right, the necessity for such a trial shows one underlying disbelief in women's words. The relegation of her words to the background to listen to what the public had to say about her further amplifies women's vulnerability in patriarchal systems. In countless subsequent versions of the Ramayana, whether oral or in folk or postcolonial /feminist renditions, there are changes and controversies regarding the incident of Agnipariksha. Some versions show her turning it down, thus proving that she has worth in every aspect, apart from passing the test. Some depict her journey to Valmiki's ashram as empowering rather than as a victim scenario. These adaptations seek to rewrite the Sita story in a way that counters the traditional depiction of her as an unblemished and dutiful wife. The modern discourse analyzing the story of Sita's Agnipariksha keeps on posing questions related to gender, justice, and the rights of individuals.

3. Draupadi's Vastraharan: A Struggle for Agency

The Mahabharata shows Draupadi exposed to public degradation because her husband, Yudhishtira, lost her in a gambling match. Public shaming by Duryodhana and Dushasana renders her utterly humiliated in front of the numerous male court members, including elder figures and other relatives who watch without intervening (Hiltebeitel 2001). Unlike Sita, Draupadi rejects the passive acceptance of her destiny through her vigorous resistance and her challenge of her illegal treatment and subsequent prayer to divine entities for aid. The way Draupadi fights back distinguishes her as a revolutionary element within the classic literary framework. Through her opposition to patriarchal norms, Draupadi becomes a transformative figure in the tale because she actively questions power structures surrounding gender (Dayal 2020).

Krishna's intervention to rescue Draupadi validates the assumption that divine male intervention remains essential for reinstating female dignity instead of acknowledging a woman's self-determining powers. The shameful treatment of Draupadi functioned as a critical point in the Mahabharata, which initiated the chain of activities culminating in the Kurukshetra war. The demand for justice by Draupadi extends beyond her personal needs because it exposes the political and moral flaws of the Kuru dynasty's rule. Draupadi breaks tradition by stating her mistreatment to the world, unlike Sita, who is required to stay silent. Different epic narratives show distinct ways of viewing female pain through their portrayals of characters. Moreover, Draupadi's episode also depicts how even the elders and other associated people did not stand up and save her.

Moral and invulnerable characters like Bhishma, Drona, and Dhritarashtra, who claim to know dharma but fail to implement it, are passive towards her violation. That is how it is that the nicely turned morality of patriarchal structures continues to remain silent regarding gendered violence. Draupadi's utterance thus unmasks the fallacies of the misrepresentation of righteousness in the epic that these sorrowful figures exemplify. At the same time, however, Draupadi's story also subverts the theme of female independence in a manner that is quite contrasting: the authority that Draupadi gains is a mere illusion behind which she is powerless and vulnerable. Though she struggles against her suppressors and rises to fight them, she remains dependent on outside forces – Krishna and her husbands in the latter's future actions to save her honour. This reliance on male characters and the role they play in freeing women, even the feminist, shows how women are transferable commodities in the social system. "In the subsequent versions of the Mahabharata and the reinterpretations from the Feminist perspective, Draupadi is depicted as a resistant subject or figure" (Erney 2022). Some of them stress her volition and show her as playing an active role in the action instead of simply being a victim. "All of these new interpretations help to rethink and reconstruct the image of Draupadi within the epic, which makes her not only a purely persecuted character, but also a force of the epic" (Arroyo 2023)

4. Public Spectacle and the Politics of Shame

Sita and Draupadi faced their trials publicly because patriarchal systems depend on communal perspectives for maintaining gender-oriented social norms. Through public punishment, Michel Foucault (1977) explains in *Discipline and Punish* that it serves to control people by instilling fear and monitoring behaviour. Sita and Draupadi experience public degradation, which functions to validate traditional gender norms as well as highlight the outcomes of failing to abide by these standards. Sita's tests of virtue receive treatment as a virtuous trial, but Draupadi's ordeal manifests itself as a display of male authority in matters of female independence. In both scenarios, the female body becomes the place where people distinguish between honour and shame. Such stories of caution are warnings to forewarn women about the unpleasant outcomes they would face if they cross patriarchal restrictions (Diesel, 2010). Sita and Draupadi's suffering brings to the fore how public scrutiny enforces patriarchal morality. Although they were facing their trials personally, these trials became spectacles of societal participation in which gendered power hierarchies were substantiated.

We can say that Sita and Draupadi bear the gender stories that are relevant in today's society all over the world. These examples stay relevant as real-life cases of the daily fight for women endangered, neglected, and discriminated against in the modern world. The age difference is not negligible, as they present two different stories of women, but they both depict public shame as a measure of women's agency.

5. Contemporary Relevance: Women's Bodies and Honour in Modern Society

The public shaming and restrictions placed on female bodies, which appear in myths, persist as active practices in modern society. The cultural practice of victim-blaming in sexual violence cases and the enforcement of clothing regulations and strict rules regarding female chastity parallel the public judgment faced by Sita and Draupadi. Nussbaum (2000) shows how collective shame remains active as a social control mechanism for women because it upholds traditional ethical standards. Current cases of honour killings combined with moral policing throughout South Asia clearly demonstrate that gender-based ideologies continue to exist in this region. The social world rejects and ostracises women when they follow choices that differ from cultural standards, such as relationships and professional work, or when they make clothing decisions. These examples correspond to Sita's exile and Draupadi's disgrace. In modern society, many communities still define female honour through both sexual cleanliness and behavioural obedience rather than personal achievements and personal character. Different law enforcement frameworks throughout the world show consistent discriminatory behaviour. The adoption of laws to protect women has not resulted in effective implementation worldwide. Survivors experience severe damage during law enforcement procedures because officials require an extensive investigation into the survivors and scrutinize their entire conduct. Institutional social bias protects the victimizers while blocking mistreated women from exercising their rights. Modern digital systems have created innovative surveillance methods that combine with publicly humiliating practices. "Modern surveillance extends past public spaces because women today experience online body investigations from invisible internet users who enforce moral judgments" (Banerjee 2023). The platforms of social media act as places where users engage in slut-shaming activities and spread doxxing content, together with revenge porn material. These attacks function as weapons to take away women's power while employing shameful tactics similar to the open-air disrobing of Draupadi. These situations demonstrate how public disgrace stands as a tool for patriarchal dominance through its enactment for control purposes. Nonetheless, women of today are avoiding such portrayals with even increasing tenacity and togetherness.

"Hashtags like #MeToo, Pinjra Tod, and SlutWalk help protest against the society and the culture that gags women and their freedom to choose and speak" (Roy 345). They depict a rejection of powerlessness and submission as depicted by women's social roles as clean, polite, and obedient women. They are also an attempt to resist the culture's norms of tameness and compliance with expectations of women's decorum. They also show that popular and religious stories need to be re-read by feminists to uncover the emancipatory messages that were masked by oppressive ones. Understanding how perpetually relevant myths of Sita and Draupadi enable modern society to engage with its entrenched discrimination. Together, these stories reflect the contemporary reality where norms governing women's lives continue to use honour and purity to enforce shame through manipulations. Addressing these narratives alongside their sustaining systems is essential for developing an environment where women avoid punishment for transgressing prescribed limitations.

6. Conclusion

The patriarchal conventions within society present female endurance through spectacles of suffering while simultaneously enforcing it as a law of moral order in Sita's Agnipariksha and Draupadi's Vastraharan. Draupadi fights back against her oppression, yet she stays confined by patriarchy, together with Sita, who accepts her suffering. Through public dishonour, these stories demonstrate present-day social forces that maintain female self-rule by creating public censure and communal humiliation. A feminist analysis of these stories enables us to evaluate how they affect existing gender-related positions in present-day society. The analysis of inherited ideas allows modern approaches to create fair evaluations of women's freedom and respect. The divergence between the silent suffering of Sita and the vocal battle of Draupadi results from their ways of resisting social limitations based upon their situation and consequences. The accepting

way Sita faces her suffering often serves as a model for perfect feminine conduct because women gain value through their power to endure without complaint. The societal perfection of Draupadi is challenged by her pursuit of justice, but she receives harsh condemnation instead of support. Both women inhabit a society that restricts female honour through rigid patriarchal rules, which require strict surveillance of feminine conduct. The mythical personas established long ago impact present-day cultural demands on women to behave in specific ways. Society tends to assess women through their adherence to the enduring archetypes since they either resemble the devout Sita or the passion-fuelled Draupadi. The issue stems from these binaries because they prevent real-life women from expressing their full range of behaviours or personal choices while subjecting them to a limited spectrum of choices. Through feminist scholarship, researchers recover suppressed stories to interpret these female characters as women who struggled with survival in an unjust system. Such feminine literary interpretations of prevalent epics revise the previous positive assessment of female suffering as an exemplary standard. The analysis calls for the abandonment of traditional practices that use pain as an indicator of femininity because it aims for justice alongside healing and power. Our understanding of the power of reviewing sacred literature evolves when we view Sita and Draupadi as complex individuals with emotional faces who utilize their moral sense and show unwavering strength. Thus, the narrative of these stories turns into an act of defiance in itself, an act that helps to recover the lost voice of the past as well as to subvert the scripts that dominate the lives of modern women. Literature, media, education, and policy actively contribute to the perpetuation of the toxic patriarchal narratives about women, consistent with the traditional gender myths, and must collaborate to transform the narratives about women. In such a manner, we can only strive towards rebuilding the evaded and mangled image of women in the mythological narratives for the real women of the actual world.

"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender." (Butler 25)

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