

Exploration of the Portrayal of Yudhishtir in Select Revisionist Texts

Noopur Srivastava

Research Scholar, (Ph. D.)
School of Arts & Humanities
REVA University,
Bengaluru, KN

Dr. Payel Dutta Chowdhury

Professor & Director,
School of Arts & Humanities
REVA University,
Bengaluru, KN

Abstract

Several revisionist writers in today's time are projecting characters from our great epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* bring out the various nuances in their personalities from a contemporary context. Yudhishtir is one of the most eminent and righteous characters in the *Mahabharata*. His representation is quite different from the ordinary *kshatriya* man. Popular for his righteous nature, he is the only one who reaches heaven with his body as only souls are permitted to enter in the heaven. Yudhishtir was the combination of the qualities of God and human. This paper looks into the complex strains in his character as portrayed in some of the select texts by revisionist writers like Pratibha Ray in *Yajnaseni*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Palace of Illusions*, M. Veerappa Moily in *The Flaming Tresses of Draupadi*, Kavita Kane in *Karna's Wife*, Devdutt Pattanaik in *Jaya* and Thakur K.B.P. Sinha in *Draupadi: The Abandoned Queen*.

Keywords- *Revisionist, Dharmaraj, Righteous, Epic, Peace, War, Mahabharata*

Introduction

The Mahabharata, the great epic, is replete with instances and stories which reflect on the lives of every human being. The epic also projects several characters, whose journeys of life teach us various nuances of the complexities that life offers. Yudhishtir, also called as Dharmaraj Yudhishtir, is one such interesting character in the epic. The etymology of his name is 'Yuddh+sthir', which means "the one who is calm and steady during war". But does this name really suit Yudhishtir? He was always trying to be far away from any type of fight or war. He always tried to ignore the crudeness of Kauravas to maintain peace and happiness in Hastinapur. But when situations became worse, at that time too he was not ready for fight. Questioning Krishna on the futility of war, he says,

Even now I wish that this war did not take place. If a solution to the problem can be found without war even now, it will be acceptable to me. It is to avoid war that I staked my wife at dice and was prepared to lose. If we had not gone into exile then, the Kauravs would have tried to take Indraprastha by force. Despite having been born in the kshatriya clan, to detest war is the weakness of my character. (Pratibha Ray 1995:366-367)

Dharmaraj Yudhishtir reflects a god-like personality even amidst the blood-shed that always surround the kshatriya life. Veerappa Moily portrays this calm nature which is quite contrary to the usual kshatriya man:

Dharmaja bent his head and with folded hands submitted,
'Sri Krishna tell me, why have we called for the bloody
Sacrifice of millions of lives?
This question haunts me? Why possess kingdoms, why hold on
To treasures of wealth, and for what end and for what purpose?
(Veerappa Moily 2017:222)

This paper is an attempt to explore the nuances in the character of this great man as reflected in the works of select revisionist writers.

The story which surrounds his birth is very insightful. His father Pandu (king of Hastinapur) went for hunting in the jungle and by mistake he killed Rishi Kindama while the sage was engaged in an intimate act with his wife. Suspecting a deer, Pandu killed him. But before dying Rishi Kindama cursed Pandu that if ever he tries to come into close proximity with any woman, he will die at that very moment. Pandu couldn't accept this murderous activity, and so left his kingdom and went to the jungle. His wives, Kunti and Madri, followed him. When Kunti got to know the real reason of his sadness, she remembered the boon of sage Durvaasa. She told Pandu about her boon that before her

marriage Durvaasa became very much happy with her service and gave the boon that she would be able to give birth to a child with the blessing of any God. Knowing this Pandu became very happy. He asked Kunti to utilize this boon to grant one successor for Hastinapur. Then she invited Dharmaraj, and Yudhishtir was born; with the proximity of Pavan Devta, Bheem was born; and by God Indra, Arjun was born. On the request of Madri, she invoked Ashwini Gods, then Nakul and Sahadev were born. Here, I would like to refer the work of Thakur K.B.P. Sinha in *Draupadi, The Abandoned Queen*, when Draupadi was talking to herself about ‘the revered old lady’ Kunti:

If so, why? Did he permit her to contact five different figures for five sons? And why did he permit her to contact so many? If they really wanted to have an heir to the throne, establishing contact with one figure was enough....It was all shrouded in mystery. (Sinha 2014:77)

Similar thoughts regarding the birthing of the Pandava brothers are expressed by Meghnad Desai in his essay, ‘Sita and some other Women from the Epics’: “Hence, it is Kunti who plays a pivotal role in the epic. Indeed, Kunti is for me the most powerful woman of the two epics. She is in complete control of her reproductive rights.” (Lal & Gokhale 2009:8)

Probing further into Yudhishtir’s character, we find him an extremely obedient son. He gave hearty respect to his mother and his elders. Yudhishtir knew his mother has suffered a lot in her life, and for her utmost respect he is ready to accept any challenge in his life. An incident in this regard is quoted here reflecting on how Draupadi became the wife of all the five brothers. Actually, before this, the Pandavas were stuck with their mother in the Lakshya-Grih in Varnavat, due to the conspiracy of Duryodhana against the Pandavas. With the intelligence of Vidhur they came out safely from that dangerous and deathful house. They started living in the Ekchakra village as guests in a Brahmin’s house in the disguise of Brahmins. Here they went door to door for alms for their livelihood. One day, Yudhishtir, Bheema and Arjuna entered the Kingdom of Panchal-Naresh Drupad for begging alms. There they heard about Draupadi-Swayamvar but they didn’t go there to win her hand, it just happened, because they had hidden their identity from Duryodhana that Pandavs are alive. But unforeseen circumstances just compelled Arjuna to enter in that contest and consequently win Draupadi’s hand.

In Draupadi-Swayamvar, Arjuna after winning Draupadi comes back home. At that time Kunti was alone and praying to God, after taking bath. Pandavas asked her to open the door and see the wonderful alms they have brought. Kunti ordered them to distribute that day’s alms among themselves. They asked her to look at that but she again told only these words. After opening the door, she realized that there is a bride with the Pandavas. Even Yudhishtir asked her to think it again but Kunti was stuck with her words. Why? Before that whatever she had spoken all her words were

immortal? Could she not behave like an educated and sophisticated lady? And the irony is that Yudhishtir was also in the same boat as Kunti. Where did his dharma go at that time? If he kept the respect and decency of his mother's word, if he was really able to understand the feelings of a woman, then why he could not understand the feelings and suffocation of Draupadi?

Here Pratibha Ray has raised her voice through Draupadi:

Would that not destroy my dharma? The very idea was ridiculous: one woman to live as the wife of five men!... Disgust was welling up in my heart for the elder brother. In his eyes I could clearly make out the secret flame of lust. (Pratibha Ray 1995:56)

To uphold his Dharma, should he not think for Draupadi? Should he not ask the opinion of Arjun? Arjun had sacrificed his wife, happiness, excitement and obviously his first love. According to Dharma, Yudhishtir had taken wrong decision in this situation. But nothing could be said as Ved Vyas himself came there and made Draupadi agree for her marriage with the five Pandavas to preserve the Dharma on the earth. But Yudhishtir should have asked Draupadi and Arjun for their opinion on that matter once, rather he followed his mother blindly; as Moily has expressed the hurt of her heart in a poetic way:

To uphold dharma, ... the eldest in transparent humility said:
'Mother! Our greatest ideal is to faithfully live by whatever you
Say and that for us is the ultimate dharma. That Draupadi
Should become the bride for all the five of us is an event most
Wondrous in the world and it can't be stalled!'

I looked at the face of the eldest and there was in his eyes
The burning desire of lust and I wondered, 'Is this the eldest
Who will not stand up against injustice?'
Who will feel, for fate? (VeerappaMoily 2017:58-59)

Yudhishtir, as a brother, was very caring, affectionate and lovable. There are so many incidents in the epic that show his emotions for his brothers. Even his brothers also respected him a lot. For them their elder brother was a God, he was like a father for them. They always obeyed him (whether he was right or not). Yudhishtir always showed his brothers the right direction in their path of life. A very small incident – when Draupadi fell down on the way to the Himalayas and Bheema moved back to help her, Yudhishtir stopped him for doing so and remarked that, “it was her punishment for her prejudice towards Arjuna as against the other Pandavas. Being the common wife, she did not treat others as well as she did Arjuna” (Sinha 2014:9) And Bheema and the other brothers followed their big brother and ignored Draupadi to die as an insect. The best example of his love and sacrifice is his conversation with Yaksha near the lake during their exile. There, Yudhishtir had

saved the lives of his brothers. He replied to the hundred questions of Yaksha very patiently and calmly. It shows his great love for his brothers, knowledge and character.

The connotations can be seen in the work of Pavan K. Verma:

“A king must, O Yaksha, his choices justify.
To refrain from injury is the highest virtue.
Kunti and Madri, two mothers had I.
I loved them both and must give each their due.
Let a son then of both rejoice and live.
This is the boon I ask you to give.”
(PavanVerma 2012:85)

At that time Draupadi was also fascinated with him. She was very grateful to Yudhishtir for saving her husbands’ life. I would like to add some more beautiful lines by Pavan K. Verma:

“She was Draupadi of Panchala, of fire born.
But left with herself, the darkness became an inquisitor
Wrenching her thoughts from positions long ensconced.
And now when she thought of her mentor
It was with a quite different kind of response.
Suddenly, out of the night, emerged an image, newly born.
Her anger with him faded, like the thunder of a receding storm.”
(PavanVerma 2012:91)

There are several stories of these brothers when they have sacrificed their selves for their elder brother. The most flaming incident was the assembly scene of the dice game, where, Yudhishtir staked his great warrior brothers and lost them as slaves to Duryodhana, but the irony was that not a single brother opened his mouth against this action when he was pushing them, as well as Draupadi, into the hell. Was this the act of a *Dharmatma* to behave in this manner with his brothers and wife? Was gambling not an unrighteous act for Yudhishtir? When Bheem raised his voice against the abasement of Draupadi, then Arjuna made him quiet saying that, “Bhim! Have you lost your senses? Yudhishtir is the eldest. He is like our father....” (Pratibha Ray 1995:239)

Yudhishtir was not aware of the true identity of his elder brother Karna, the eldest son of Kunti. But Karna knew that Pandavas were his brothers. When Kunti and Krishna came to meet him before the Great War, Karna requested Kunti not to make open the relationship of his brothers, especially with Yudhishtir. He knew that when Yudhishtir would hear the truth about him, he would not fight for Dharma and Karna did not want that. He also had respect and love for Yudhishtir as an elder brother. In the Kurukshetra war he advised Yudhishtir to go back and send Arjun for the

fight, he said, “O Yudhishtira, you are the noblest kshatriya but more a brahmin at heart.” (Kavita Kane 2014:280) When Yudhishtir did get to know the truth of Karna, he cursed his mother and after Karna’s death, Pandavas sank in a deep sorrow, especially, Yudhishtir and Arjuna. Yudhishtir was aware of Karna’s sacrificial nature, which had left a stamp on his heart. Also, Karna was very strong and brave as well as of a loyal and deterministic temperament.

A reflection on Yudhishtir’s student life highlights that he was very sharp and devoted to his Gurus and education. A story about his gurukula days is quite well-known. Guru Kripacharya had asked the Pandava and Kaurava brothers to learn a sentence ‘always speak the truth’. Everyone learnt that line and spoke in front of Guru, only Yudhishtir said that he couldn’t learn that lesson. With the passing of every single day, whenever Guru Kripacharya asked him about the lesson he replied he was not ready. Amazed at this the guru asked him the reason why he is not able to learn a simple sentence. Yudhishtir replied very politely that the lesson was not simple and he cannot lie to his teacher saying that he has mastered it unless he is able to follow the same in his life. As a student he was intelligent and outstanding and was looked upon by everyone.

Now, the most important aspect of his personality is, Yudhishtir as a husband. Draupadi was his first love, wife and empress in his life. He accepted and said to Draupadi, “Come Yajnaseni! As partner in my life, in the dharma-yajna, become my wife in dharma – You are the first woman in my life.” (Pratibha Ray 1995) For him dharma was the most significant essence in his life. But a close analysis of his character reveals that as a husband, he was not perfect and mature, and fell short of the ideal traits of a man as husband. The person who can stake his wife in the open assembly; the person who can’t save his wife from a lecher like Keechak; the person who can’t understand the feelings of a woman well as a human being; the person who can’t maintain the dignity of a human being; that person should not be called *DHARMARAJA*. When Draupadi was being dragged, pulled by her hair, in to the assembly by Dushshaasana, we can’t see any aggression or reaction of a true *dharmatma*, on Yudhishtir’s face.

Before the incident Draupadi asked him not to play the dice game, but at that time he ignored her advice and went to fulfill his *dharma* as a king. Here I like to present a conversation between Yudhishtir and Draupadi through the revisionist text of Pratibha Ray. In a grave voice he said,

Yajnaseni! Hunting, drinking, dicing and womanising, these four habits are the enemies of a king. I know this. Yet if Duryodhan has sent this invitation with the permission of grandfather and the elders, then I will not be able to refuse.

But you are not good at dicing – this too everyone knows. Defeat is certain, this too I can see clearly.

Despite knowing for sure that he will be defeated, the kshatriya does not turn back.

(Pratibha Ray 1995: 230-231)

Even Uncle Vidur clearly revealed the fact that Duryodhan wanted to cheat him with the help of his Uncle Shakuni, still he was ready to go to Hastinapur to play the dice game. Why? In kshatriya dharma, the usage of knowledge and patience and utilizing them at the proper time is the reflection of a great personality. Draupadi felt hurt and said, “I was silent hearing the firm decision of Yudhishtir. What was the value of my refusal or consent or my apprehensions?” (Pratibha Ray 1995:230-231)

As Yudhishtir’s wife, Draupadi received only mental pain, and physical pain, and even spiritual pain also. Time and again Draupadi tried to make her situations better for everyone, but it seems that misfortune had waited for her marriage. Draupadi’s view as a wife for her husband Yudhishtir is reflected in these words:

Full of anguish and anger I was thinking: was woman merely man’s movable or immovable property? Was I part of Yudhishtir’s movable or immovable property, male and female slaves, horses and elephants? Being a woman did I not have right even over myself, my own soul? If they had rights over this body of mine, did it mean they could do as they wished with me? (Pratibha Ray 1995:235)

Revisionists have presented the suffocation and mental humiliation of Draupadi more than her physical insult. And wherever she was facing insults, humiliations, abasement in her whole life, there the responsible person was only Yudhishtir. Given below is a heart-touching statement of Draupadi: “Alas! At one-time comparing Dharmaraj Yudhishtir’s personality to that of Ram I used to feel immensely glorified. For protecting the honor of chaste Sita how much sorrow and pain did Ram not undergo? He bore the profound anguish of raising the question of the test by fire to prove in public her chastity. While my husband having staked me, and having handed me over to others is sitting there. A mute spectator, he is watching me being insulted.” (Pratibha Ray 1995:241)

Even Divakaruni delves into this context and reflects Draupadi’s thoughts:

I can’t be gambled away like a bag of coins, or summoned to court like a dancing girl. But then I remembered ...The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave....

My head reeled, but I steadied myself. I tried to remember other words from Nyaya Shastra. If perchance a man lost himself, he no longer had any jurisdiction over his wife.

Go back to the court,” I ordered, “and ask the elders this: is it not true that once Yudhishtir was Duryodhana’s property, he had no right to wager me? (Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni 2008: 190-191).

From Draupadi, Yudhishtir had a son Prativindra, but he was slaughtered by Ashvatthama in the night while he was sleeping. The other wife of Yudhishtir was Devika. There is not much information about her. She was the daughter of Govasana and belonged to Saivya tribe. With her, Yudhishtir had a son named Yaudheya.

Yudhishtir was a great emperor. The people of Hastinapur loved him and his judicial wisdom. Yudhishtir always wanted to maintain peace and happiness in his Kingdom. But the cruel-minded Duryodhana always ruined his truthful and peaceful life. Kauravas destroyed themselves, as well as so many people in the Kurukshetra war. Their narrow thinking and greed for becoming the ruler of Hastinapur and Indraprastha led to the war and the colossal bloodbath. After getting victory over Kauravas, Yudhishtir refused to accept the crown of Hastinapur, as Devdutt Pattanaik has displayed the mourning of Yudhishtir when he said, "I am a murderer," he cried. "My hands are soaked with the blood of my family. When I sit on the pile of corpses, how can I drink the cup of success? What is the point of it all?" (Pattanaik 2010:307)

Then, Shree Krishna explained the greatness of Yudhishtir as a marvelous emperor. He praised Yudhishtir, "Who better than you..." (Pattanaik 2010:308)

Definitely, he always spoke the truth and everybody knows that truth is so bitter to accept. He carried truth and justice, love and peace, honor and respect, unity and dignity, power and command, and took the Kuru dynasty to greater heights in the world. He ruled his kingdom for thirty-six years with peace and pleasure. His coronation and Ashwamedha Yagna were great success. It was only him, who reached the heaven (Swarga) alive. All his brothers and Draupadi went to hell (Narka). At that time Yudhishtir cried for his brothers and relatives and he also wanted to stay there. But the shastras and the Bhagavad Gita state that human beings should get away from all Moh-Maya, but Yudhishtir was immersed in these feelings. As Devdutt Pattanaik concludes in the last chapter of his book, *Jaya*, and gives the solution of Yudhishtir's sorrow:

You have given up your kingdom and your clothes, son of Dharma, but not your hatred'... suddenly, a vision unfolded before Yudhishtir. The Virat-swarup of Krishna. 'Behold within God,' a voice boomed, 'all that exists. Everything. Everyone. Draupadi and Gandhari. The Pandavas and Kauravas. All possibilities. The killers and the killed.

At that moment, Yudhishtir realized he was not the great man who he thought he was. He had not really overcome his prejudices ... Realization humbled Yudhishtir. (Pattanaik 2010:337)

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Conclusion

To sum up my views on Yudhishtir based on few select revisionist texts, we may conclude that he was a scintillating character of the great epic *Mahabharata*. The *Mahabharat* is incomplete without this huge and commendable personality. Dwaparyug ended with the end of Yudhishtir's reign, he handed over his kingdom to Parikshit, grandson of Arjun and Subhadra instead of his son. His character was above all discriminations of that age, where he was surrounded with the people like Kauravas.

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