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Intersecting Identities and Feminine Reclamation in Trisha Das's *Ms Draupadi Kuru*: A Reading Through an Intersectional Lens

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Abstract: This paper examines Trisha Das's *Ms Draupadi Kuru: After the Pandavas* through the lens of intersectional feminism, exploring how mythic women from the *Mahabharata* are reimagined within the socio-cultural realities of contemporary India. By situating Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Amba amid modern Delhi's gendered and classed spaces, Das interrogates the continuing entanglement of patriarchy, caste, and power in shaping female identity. Drawing on the theories of Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the study analyses how the novel transforms myth into a site of moral education and feminist self-realisation. The narrative's humour and irony challenge traditional hierarchies while affirming solidarity among women across temporal and cultural boundaries. Ultimately, the paper argues that Das's work envisions empowerment not as rebellion alone but as reflection, empathy, and collective transformation.

Keywords:Trisha Das, *Ms Draupadi Kuru*, Intersectionality, Feminist rewriting, Indian mythology, Women's empowerment, Patriarchy, Moral education, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw.

Introduction

The Indian mythological imagination has long been a site of gendered contestation where women's voices, though central to the moral order of the epic world, are often submerged under the authority of divine law and patriarchal control. Trisha Das's *Ms Draupadi Kuru: After the Pandavas* reclaims these submerged voices by reimagining the Mahabharata's women—Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Amba—in contemporary Delhi. Through this imaginative resurrection, Das constructs an audacious dialogue between past and present, mythology and modernity, power and resistance. Her narrative challenges the monolithic portrayal of epic women as passive moral symbols and reconstructs them as agents negotiating multiple axes of oppression—gender, class, caste, and age. The novel's premise is not merely comic or irreverent; it becomes a profound inquiry into how women internalise, resist, and transcend the hierarchies that persist across time.

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In *Ms Draupadi Kuru*, Draupadi's return to earth after centuries is not just a fantastical event but a metaphorical act of revisiting history to rewrite the silences embedded in it. Das uses humour, irony, and empathy to expose the ways in which patriarchal power still governs the language and social institutions of the modern world. The intersectional experiences of Draupadi and her companions reveal that oppression does not operate along a single axis of gender but through its entanglement with class privilege, caste-based hierarchies, and generational expectations. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality provides a useful framework here, as it articulates how "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" and that women of marginal identities "are often erased in discourses that claim to represent womanhood as a whole" (Crenshaw 1244). Das's retelling thus performs an act of recovery, inserting complexity and multiplicity into the mythic woman's consciousness.

Draupadi's character, in particular, becomes a meeting point for these intersecting forces. As a woman born of divine fire and shared among five men, her very existence in the Mahabharata defied the codes of chastity, purity, and possession. In Das's re-envisioning, Draupadi's past becomes both her burden and her weapon. She walks through Delhi not as a relic but as a witness—observing how women's bodies, choices, and freedoms continue to be surveilled. Her discomfort with the city's moral duplicities mirrors what bell hooks calls the "continuous re-inscription of patriarchal power through everyday language and institutions" (*Ain't I a Woman* 28). Yet, instead of despair, Das infuses Draupadi's rediscovery of modern womanhood with irony and tenderness, suggesting that even within systemic oppression, there lies the potential for self-definition.

bell hooks's intersectional feminism insists that feminism must not become a space of privileged narratives but a collective movement for liberation across all boundaries. As she asserts, "There can be no real sisterhood until the divisions created by racism and classism are acknowledged and transcended" (*Feminism Is for Everybody* 62). In *Ms Draupadi Kuru*, these divisions are not only acknowledged but dramatized. Draupadi, now walking among educated, urban women, begins to perceive how modern privilege can mask its own oppressions. The urban woman of Das's novel—liberated by consumerism, yet shackled by patriarchal expectations of desirability—becomes a mirror to Draupadi's ancient predicament. The novel thus performs a double critique: it exposes the continuity of gendered subjugation while interrogating the illusion of emancipation within capitalist modernity.

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Chandra Talpade Mohanty's influential essay "Under Western Eyes" critiques the homogenization of Third World women as a singular oppressed category, emphasizing that feminist inquiry must consider the historical and cultural specificity of women's experiences (Mohanty 335). Das's novel operates precisely within this logic. By allowing mythological Indian women to inhabit contemporary Indian space, Das resists both the idealization of the epic feminine and the Western feminist impulse to universalize gender oppression. Instead, she offers an insider's dialogue—a conversation among Indian women across eras about the kinds of freedoms they desire and the costs those freedoms entail.

In this reimagined landscape, education, knowledge, and critical consciousness emerge as the true sites of emancipation. As Gandhari observes in one of the novel's reflective moments, "The blindfold I wore was not cloth—it was faith, unquestioned and untested" (Das 78). Through such moments, Das suggests that blindness, whether literal or ideological, is a choice conditioned by patriarchy's promise of protection. The act of removing that blindfold, therefore, becomes symbolic of intersectional awakening—the recognition that oppression operates in layered forms, often under the guise of love, family, and tradition.

In reading *Ms Draupadi Kuru* through intersectionality, one recognises how Das transforms mythology into a living text of feminist education. The laughter that animates the narrative is not merely comic relief but what hooks identifies as a strategy of resistance: "To laugh is to refuse submission—to locate oneself outside the oppressor's terms of definition" (*Ain't I a Woman* 73). Draupadi's irreverent humour, her ability to question both gods and men, becomes the novel's ethical core. She mocks the absurdity of moral double standards and exposes how even divinity, in patriarchal storytelling, has been complicit in the subjugation of women.

This first section of the paper thus establishes the framework for understanding *Ms Draupadi Kuru* as a text that merges mythic consciousness with feminist revisionism. Das's project is not simply about resurrecting legendary women but about excavating the social DNA of oppression that persists across time. By placing Draupadi and her companions in the neoliberal metropolis, she uncovers how patriarchy adapts itself within education, media, marriage, and consumer culture.

In *Ms Draupadi Kuru*, Trisha Das deftly employs irony and reversal to situate epic heroines within a world that is both familiar and estranging. Draupadi's return to Delhi is not framed as nostalgia but as confrontation. Her observations about urban life expose how patriarchy has merely altered its vocabulary while sustaining its

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control. When she remarks that women today "choose their clothes but not their safety" (Das 54), the line encapsulates the illusion of agency that liberal modernity extends to women. Choice becomes cosmetic, constrained by fear and surveillance. Draupadi's frustration with these contradictions evokes what bell hooks calls the "false sense of freedom that arises when women mistake consumer choice for liberation" (*Feminism Is for Everybody* 41).

Kunti's reappearance offers a contrasting but equally layered examination of motherhood, duty, and guilt. Das portrays her as a woman who has long carried the moral burden of decisions made under patriarchal law. Her quiet confession—"I was a mother to men, never to sons" (Das 102)—reveals the violence of self-effacement demanded of mothers who serve lineage rather than affection. Through Kunti, Das interrogates the sanctification of motherhood as a moral ideal that often erases the woman's own subjectivity. Crenshaw's articulation of intersectionality helps to read Kunti's predicament as the collision of gender and age: she is simultaneously a revered elder and an invisible woman. Her authority is spiritual, not social. The aged female body, stripped of erotic power, is relegated to the margins of both epic and modern worlds.

Gandhari, once the embodiment of dutiful blindness, now emerges as a figure of philosophical introspection. Das transforms her literal blindness into a critique of ideological blindness. When Gandhari confides, "It was easier to live blind than to see and be powerless" (Das 79), the statement resonates with countless women who internalise silence as survival. Mohanty's observation that patriarchy "works through the consent of the subordinated, naturalising obedience as virtue" (Mohanty 340) illuminates Gandhari's dilemma. Her blindness becomes an inherited metaphor for the ways in which women are taught to valorise endurance over dissent. By allowing Gandhari to acknowledge her complicity, Das stages an ethical recovery—the blindfold is removed not merely to see, but to understand.

Amba, in contrast, embodies the rage that refuses sublimation. She arrives in Delhi furious, restless, and acutely aware that reincarnation has not freed her from patriarchal memory. Das endows her with the consciousness of history's repetition; she notes bitterly that "men have found new ways to conquer—hashtags, contracts, and compliments" (Das 117). This line compresses millennia of gendered power into a single insight: domination evolves. bell hooks describes this evolution as the "adaptive resilience of patriarchy, which absorbs feminist resistance only to repackage domination in subtler forms" (*Ain't I a Woman* 82).

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Amba's anger, therefore, becomes pedagogical—it educates the reader about the necessity of vigilant feminism, one that must constantly reinterpret the faces of oppression.

Das's reworking of these mythic figures is anchored in language that refuses reverence. The narrative tone alternates between the colloquial and the lyrical, demonstrating that feminist rewriting can thrive within humour. The women's banter over coffee or fashion magazines does not trivialise their histories; instead, it becomes a medium through which they reclaim ordinary pleasures long denied to them. When Draupadi laughs at a soap opera, mocking its portrayal of domestic virtue, her laughter destabilises centuries of moral instruction. As hooks observes, "Humour, for the oppressed, is a means of bearing witness to pain without surrendering to it" (*Ain't I a Woman* 73). Das uses laughter as political therapy—a form of embodied resistance that turns the domestic into the discursive.

Throughout the novel, education emerges as the central metaphor for emancipation. Draupadi's father's insistence that she pursue learning rather than marriage echoes in Das's reinterpretation when Draupadi urges a young girl in Delhi to "read until your anger turns into wisdom" (Das 144). This sentiment recalls hooks's claim that "education as the practice of freedom is the means by which we deal critically and creatively with reality" (*Feminism Is for Everybody* 57). By re-situating the ancient heroine as a mentor figure, Das redefines the axis of empowerment from vengeance to pedagogy. Draupadi's knowledge of suffering becomes her curriculum for younger women trapped in modern cycles of gendered exploitation.

Das also exposes the intersection of class and gender through the women's encounters with service workers and street vendors. The gap between Draupadi's mythic stature and the lived precarity of working women underscores the persistence of class hierarchy within feminist discourse. Draupadi's shock at seeing a domestic worker beaten by her employer forces her to confront her own former privilege as queen. "I once commanded armies, but I never saw the women who cleaned the floors of my palace" (Das 128). This admission transforms her awakening from personal to political. As Crenshaw reminds us, "When feminism fails to interrogate race and class, the result is a partial vision that erases the most vulnerable" (Crenshaw 1253). Das's portrayal of solidarity across social strata restores that missing vision.

One of the novel's most subtle achievements lies in its treatment of desire. Whereas the epic tradition moralised female sexuality, Das reclaims it as an ethical space of agency. Draupadi's curiosity about dating

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apps and Gandhari's amused reflections on intimacy in old age challenge the dichotomy of virtue and desire. By depicting sexuality without shame, Das disarms the moral vocabulary that has long policed women's bodies. In this sense, *Ms Draupadi Kuru* participates in what Mohanty calls "decolonising desire," a process that reclaims pleasure as political knowledge (Mohanty 347).

The emotional climax of the narrative occurs when Draupadi confronts her own mythic image in a museum exhibit dedicated to "Great Women of India." She gazes at her portrait and murmurs, "She looks nothing like me" (Das 172). The scene encapsulates the alienation of women from their representations. It is a moment of metatextual clarity where the heroine recognises that being remembered is not the same as being understood. hooks's insight that "representation is a site of struggle for meaning, not a mirror of truth" (*Feminism Is for Everybody* 35) helps decode the poignancy of this moment. Das dismantles the static image of the mythic woman and replaces it with a living subject who questions her own legacy.

Through these layered portraits, Das constructs a feminist pedagogy that unites mythic consciousness with modern social critique. Each woman represents a mode of feminist awakening: Draupadi's defiance, Kunti's reflection, Gandhari's repentance, and Amba's indignation. Together they illustrate that empowerment is neither linear nor uniform—it is intersectional, shifting, and deeply human. Their return to heaven at the end of the novel does not mark closure but continuity, suggesting that the struggle against patriarchal oppression persists across ages.

Das's *Ms Draupadi Kuru* thus operates on multiple temporal and ideological registers. It bridges the epic and the everyday, the sacred and the secular, the mythical and the modern. Through this intertextual crossing, Das dismantles the binary between antiquity and progress, revealing that the evolution of civilization has not guaranteed the evolution of empathy. The intersections of gender, class, and power she portrays are reminders that patriarchal systems adapt faster than they erode. Draupadi's encounter with contemporary Delhi does not simply underscore how women remain objectified—it illuminates how they also internalise structures of domination under the guise of autonomy.

By reanimating mythic figures in a twenty-first-century context, Das exposes how language continues to encode inequality. The insults, endearments, and silences that structure women's daily interactions become linguistic mirrors of systemic power. bell hooks notes that "language is also a place of struggle. The

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oppressor's language is both a weapon of domination and a means of resistance" (*Ain't I a Woman* 168). Das's heroines learn to subvert this linguistic hegemony not by inventing a new tongue but by speaking differently within the old one. Their speech—sarcastic, tender, unapologetic—turns the vocabulary of shame into a lexicon of survival.

The intersectional perspective allows us to see that Das's feminist project is not singularly concerned with gender liberation but with social justice as a collective process. Draupadi's compassion for the women she meets—sex workers, students, domestic helpers—extends feminism beyond identity into community. This reflects hooks's insistence that "feminism is for everybody" precisely because "patriarchy has no gender; men and women alike participate in it" (*Feminism Is for Everybody* 72). By envisioning an ethics of solidarity rooted in shared struggle, *Ms Draupadi Kuru* transforms mythology into a field of moral education.

The novel's narrative rhythm, oscillating between comedy and confession, mimics the pedagogical journey from awareness to transformation. The mythic heroines begin as spectators of modern India but gradually become its teachers. When Draupadi tells her companions, "Perhaps we came not to rule but to learn," she redefines power as understanding, not dominance (Das 174). Her insight recalls Crenshaw's observation that intersectionality is not only an analytic tool but a "method of seeing and learning from the lived complexity of oppression" (Crenshaw 1248). Das's women model this method: they learn from what they once failed to see, and through that learning, they humanise resistance.

The ethical significance of *Ms Draupadi Kuru* lies in its refusal to glorify either victimhood or vengeance. Instead, it offers what Mohanty describes as a "feminist solidarity through decolonised empathy" (Mohanty 349). By uniting women from different temporal, social, and emotional geographies, Das reclaims the Mahabharata's women from the symbolic realm of virtue and restores them to the material realm of voice. Education, conversation, and compassion become the tools of liberation—tools that dismantle the institutionalised violence of caste, class, and gender not through confrontation alone but through self-awareness and mutual recognition.

Trisha Das's work, therefore, aligns with bell hooks's broader vision of feminist futurity. It affirms that the goal of feminist writing is not simply to expose oppression but to imagine a language in which freedom can be spoken and lived. The women of *Ms Draupadi Kuru* embody that linguistic freedom. They talk back to gods,

laugh at moral codes, and reclaim everyday acts—reading, walking, loving—as radical gestures of survival. Their journey from the epic to the everyday becomes an allegory for all women who navigate the contradictions of tradition and progress.

Das's humour-laced narrative thus emerges as an instrument of moral education—a call to perceive the personal as political and the mythic as modern. In her creative act of reclamation, she constructs a continuum of women's history that honours pain but privileges resilience. The novel's success lies in its refusal to resolve its conflicts neatly, acknowledging that liberation is iterative, not final. Each return of Draupadi and her sisters to heaven signifies that every generation of women must return, relearn, and resist anew.

Conclusion

Trisha Das's *Ms Draupadi Kuru* ultimately offers a compelling mirror to the modern woman's own struggle between liberation and limitation. Through the resurrected voices of Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, and Amba, the novel urges women to recognise that emancipation is not a destination but a journey of self-discovery and collective awakening. The intersectional lens reveals how gender cannot be examined apart from caste, class, age, and power—each strand influencing the other in subtle yet potent ways.

Modern women, therefore, are invited to view freedom not as rebellion alone but as reflection, education, and the quiet courage to unlearn inherited hierarchies. Draupadi's insistence on confronting her past, Kunti's negotiation with guilt, and Amba's reclamation of agency become metaphors for every woman who seeks to define herself beyond patriarchal scripts. Das's text reminds us that real empowerment is not mimicry of masculine strength but the creation of new vocabularies of empathy, justice, and self-knowledge. As Draupadi asserts, "We have returned to learn, not to rule," her words echo as a timeless call for women to turn resistance into wisdom and individual assertion into collective transformation. The novel thus leaves today's woman with a profound lesson: to be truly free, she must remain intersectionally aware, historically conscious, and courageously compassionate.

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