

Resolution of Betrayals: The Postwar Dreams and Nightmares in P.K. Balakrishnan's 'And Now Let Me Sleep'

Introduction

P.K. Balakrishna's novel "Now Let Me Sleep" is based on Mahabharata drawing mainly on Swastika and Stri Parvas, and partly on Shanti Parva. The title comes from the words of prayer spoken by Draupadi after the war. Having endured thousands of sleepless nights, her mind smouldering and her hair left untied, Draupadi longs for a restful night. But can she really sleep? The whole novel is a series of dreams, nightmares, flashbacks through which the past and present have to realign in the minds of the protagonists, mainly Draupadi and Yudhishtira particularly in relationship to Karna before they can get over their terrible and almost maddening guilt and despair. Is this just a dramatic device or does it point to a psychological truth. According to the Upanishads, dreaming is only one of the states of consciousness of the self the other three being waking, deep sleep and turiya. The last is the foundational state of the Godhead, the Self, or the Atman. From it emerge the other three states of the self – the waking, dreaming and the deep sleep. Waking, the self knows what is outside which is common to all people. Dreaming it knows what is within and is private. But does this make dreaming unreal, and waking real? Perhaps not. It depends on what we consider the nature of reality to be.

In the waking state the self uses the intellect or the reasoning mind to gain its desired ends. Therefore, the intellect or the reasoning mind is the principle of the waking life. But even when the intellect fails in deep sleep everything does not end, something continues. It makes us realise that we have rested from the weariness, fatigue and sorrow of the waking state and woken up refreshed or vice versa.

Between the waking and the deep sleep is the state of dreaming. Usually, the dream state is thought to be unreal, but in India, there is a constant debate on the nature of reality. The boundaries between the real and unreal are porous, making the two states interchangeable. This is evident from the story of creation itself because at one level the waking world is merely the dream of the Creator, the Supreme Being, Vishnu. Nothing existed at the beginning but a vast ocean on which Vishnu slept on the coils of a great snake. And as he slept, he dreamt. Out of his navel grew a wonderful lotus from which arose the universe. Therefore all that we believe to

be real is nothing but the creator's unfolding dream. Similarly, in the dream state we create a world which is very real to us, in which we are happy, sad, fearful; in which we see wonderful things, travel, meet, people or are hurt and even die.

In dream, the mind experiences everything out of its own substance. It has no apparatus from outside. It does not take the assistance of objects from the world external. There is nothing there, really speaking, except itself. But it projects itself into space, time and objects, and creates an imaginary world of its own. And in this imaginary world it can experience all the consequences of its desires. There is love and hatred; pleasure and pain, in the state of dream.

If dreams are the intermediary state between waking and deep sleep and all three are nothing but altered states of consciousness, then, dreams in some inexplicable way can become a valid source of insight into reality.

The pivot in the novel is Kunti's revelation on the battlefield strewn with corpses and mangled bodies that Karna is her eldest born and so Yudhishtira must first perform obsequies for him. This news is so stunning that even the weeping widows forget their lamentation and Yudhishtira stands bewildered suspecting his consciousness. Eventually blazing with anger he curses not only his mother but through her all womankind "henceforth may no woman be ever able to guard a secret." Karna emerges as the main protagonist because both Draupadi and Yudhishtira have to come terms with their relationship with him before they can be at peace with themselves. Yudhishtira realizes that in the ultimate analysis, the Pandavas owe not only their victory but also their very lives to Karna's nobility and magnanimity.

The revelation about Karna leads to some fundamental questions in the minds of both Yudhishtira and Draupadi. Was it in truth the evil of pride masquerading as righteousness that paved the way for the Great War and the destruction of the Kuru race? Was then truth the only casualty in a war fought seemingly on the bedrock of dharma? Was it Yudhishtira's lifelong fear of Karna that made him so ecstatic at his death? Draupadi's questions to herself are even more searing as she becomes aware of her terrible loneliness and complete alienation from everybody but especially from Yudhishtira. Yudhishtira, she realizes, had in truth wanted to win the country that he considered his by right and had merely used the immediate and continuous stimulus of Draupadi's revenge as a justification. Draupadi had sent her children to

her father and had accompanied her husbands to the forest although vowing to remain celibate till her mission was accomplished. Thus, she had denied both her womanhood and motherhood. What did she get at the end? Nothing but a lonely sorrow as Yudhishtira grieved for no one but Karna, not even for her children who had been sacrificed in this war of ambition and revenge. In front of her lay the tomb of her desires with the mutilated dead bodies of her own sons, father and brothers. Draupadi was not just alone in her grief; but she also could not pretend to be a part of Yudhishtira's. God she knew, might not pardon her alienation from Yudhishtira, but he would also not pardon self deceit. There had been enough of that. In her terrible loneliness, Draupadi seeks answers to some fundamental questions. Was she ever loved for herself, entirely for herself? Was she a chaste wife? Had she ever got love or given love? What was love anyway and what was the basis of loving and being loved? Did she ever have a protector even while she had five husbands alive? Who saved her from widowhood? Who was Krishna and what was he to her?

Yudhishtira's Guilt

The questions of both Yudhishtira and Draupadi seek resolution as they are examined through thoughts that intermingle seamlessly with their dreams, nightmares and flashbacks. The majority of them belong to Draupadi but Yudhishtira and Kunti too are prey to them. When Yudhishtira comes to know of his relationship with Karna on the battlefield where he goes to perform the last rites of the dead warriors, he summons Karna's wives and unites them with the women of his own family while immersing his ashes of Karna in the Ganga. But after this, unable to take any more, he falls into a swoon and is gathered up with great difficulty by Dhritrashtra:

The pitiable spectacle of the blind father pacing up his steps to the elevated spot carrying Yudhishtira in his arms of superhuman strength as lightly as a sleeping child, made the women stand dumbfounded unable even to cry. Before reaching the hut, Yudhishtira opened his eyes being awakened by the tears dripping from the old man's eyes. None uttered a word.

Yudhishtira is so overwhelmed by the guilt of fratricide that he wants to abandon the kingdom and retreat into the forests to live the life of a mendicant. He realizes that

Contrary to heart's desire and its power of discretion, truth will struggle itself at times its wings torn off. Looking at the charming forest of morality and visualizing the garden of

unbreakable destiny, truth will sometimes fall in a vacuum and writhe itself. That struggle is really pathetic. The power of asceticism and nobility of desires causes more bleeding from the scars left by the severed wings.

No one feels Yudhishtira understands the state of his mind as they try to persuade him retreat into the forest is not possible for him. Yudhishtira has to come to terms with his lifelong fear of Karna when he had always regarded as his most dangerous enemy. It had haunted him all his life and because of which he wanted him killed at all cost. He acknowledges his fear while performing Karna's last rites: "I have spent sleepless the last thirteen years of my life, haunted by the thought of Karna's indomitable strength." Later in the evening as he sits outside his hut by the Ganga watching the agony of the young widows and holding himself responsible for the destruction, he tries to explain to sage Narada why he wants to take refuge in the forests. Narada attempts to lessen Yudhishtira's guilt feelings by explaining to him that he was not really the doer but a mere agency because everything happened according destiny. But he also points at the root of all Yudhishtira's anxieties about the war and forces him to acknowledge his secret fear of Karna which he had never revealed to anyone.

Yudhishtira is tortured by the thought that while his animosity was propelling him to ensure the death of his elder brother Karna. Karna had promised to grant him his life on the battlefield and kept his word. Yudhishtira's life had been saved by him

as alms more than once... The lives possessed by Bhima, Nakula and Sahdeva are Karna's charity. In a sense, is not the life of Arjuna himself received as alms from Karna?

This realization haunts him in a nightmare as he groans in his sleep "Arjuna, Arjuna." It was as if "human language got mixed up with an animal's dying groan." He awakens "in that cold night, with his perspiring face propped on his arms." He tries to regain his calm by gazing at the star-lit river while Draupadi looks questioningly at him.

Yudhishtira narrates his dream to her with a fearful face and staggering voice. Karna and Arjuna are seated on their chariots, fiercely fighting with each other. Yudhishtira, in terror, tries to call out to Arjuna, "my elder brother he is your own brother" but no sound comes. He wants to jump in between the two but he can't move. As he describes the sight to Draupadi he trembles, unable to move or speak. In the end he cries out what he saw

Coat of mail disrupted, his body bathed in blood like a red mountain sending out crimson rivers and producing a tumultuous sound, Karna darted terrible arrows cleaving Arjuna's neck. The neck and head severed by the amazingly strong arrow stood in that state for a while. The bow Gandeeva and the arrow quickly fell on either side from his hands as if overthrown by some force.

This was actually a manifestation of what Yudhishtira secretly feared. Draupadi stares frightened at Yudhishtira. How can he imagine the beheading of Arjuna by Karna's arrows? He must be totally torn from reality. However, she has a similar dream later which finally resolves her dilemmas.

For Yudhishtira this vision has been a recurrent part of his life, "Not a concept, but as reality." He explains,

Many years I lived visualizing that terrible sight. That vague nightmare frightened me in my waking state as well as in my sleep. It cast a black shadow in all my activities, in my thoughts and dreams. The imagination hiding in a corner of my heart like a snake in the hole always troubled my conscience. Today I discern it as a harsh reality in bold outlines.

It is apprehension of this terror that makes him lose control and insult both Arjuna and his Gandeeva, when Arjuna comes looking for him after he has fled the battlefield defeated by Karna but allowed by him to escape by him. Arjuna wants to avenge the insult to his Gandeeva and rushes towards his brother with a sword to kill him but Vasudeva had intervenes. As Yudhishtira described the scene to Draupadi she trembles with fear thinking of how catastrophic the outcome could have been and how Yudhishtira at that time had got "transformed into an entirely different person being abused unbearably by Karna, his biggest enemy." This is what happens to the best of men.

The Curse of Motherhood: Kunti Draupadi and Gandhari

Yudhishtira's self reproach gets intensified and his life becomes a series of nightmares as he remembers his ecstasy on seeing Karna's beheaded body. But it makes Draupadi realize for the first time the essential nobility and magnanimity of Karna and she rises above her own humiliation at his hands. "Her heart bowed down with reverence and deep sympathy in front of the figure" she imagines standing with head held proudly high against a misfortune greater than hers. Very generously turned them away granting them life who are pledged to kill him—thereby becoming the target of bitter enmity of honorable men burning in the ignominy of receiving their

life as alms. In front of the misfortunes of Karna, her mishaps appeared silly. Are not her tribulations a trifle beside the affliction of Yudhishtira burning in self-reproach?

However Draupadi has her own nightmares. As night falls, the image of the burning barracks arises before her, not as a bygone event but as something happening in front of her. A loud question springs from beyond the sphere of consciousness; why did Kunti keep quiet about Karna even after apprehending the dark shadow of total destruction. She shudders as if hearing the sound from nowhere but Kunti sleeps undisturbed: “Is there a wonderful region in between life and death,” wonders Draupadi, “which is neither life nor death? Where exists this mother who is now not in the animate world? Is she pricking a mind that is already dead?”

The answer is given by Kunti the following day when she hears Draupadi lamenting the death of her sons:

The God that caused miseries for man had also created tears out of his infinite mercy. But I have no tears to wash away my sorrows. My cursed eyes and heart do not deserve to have tears which can sanctify all sorrows depriving it of all impurities. Can a mother who has killed her son weep like the mother who laments over the sons killed in battle? Neither man nor fate can appreciate that lamentation. You may think I am denying myself the consolation of crying. But do you know that I can never cry? All the tears in my life is dried up in the terrible heat of sin concealed in my mind for years.

As if in a trance Kunti keeps recalling the past: her maidenhood when she served the terrifying Durvasa rishi and her irresponsibility in using the mantra to summon Surya. What followed was almost a rape. She became pregnant and had to live in isolation till the child was born so that it could be kept a secret.

That day marked the beginning of her life of deception, keeping one thing in the heart and the face showing just the opposite. A volcano fumed in her mind. But she lived with a cool smile in the face. It is years since her kinship with truth is cut off. The connection between her heart and facial expression has been severed forever. Face has become a mere mask.

Kunti relives the floating away of the casket carrying her new born son, and sits silently utterly weary and unable to breathe, not even aware of Draupadi wiping away her tears. Draupadi can only muse on the irony of life and its meaning which brings: “A son whom his mother alone recognizes to be hers and the son who is world famous” in an encounter in which both are intent on killing each other.

This takes, Draupadi to her own guilt in her relationship with her sons. They had vanished into nothingness even before they had experienced anything of life. Full of remorse she prays to her children for mercy and compassion. In her horror she realizes that she cannot even recall them as the young men who had died for her sake. The images that come to her are of the children whom she had sent to her father:

In the grip of the guilt that she was a mother who could not even imagine the figures of her sons, tears rolled down profusely from her closed eyelids. Flowing down her cheeks and trickling down by the neck and chest, it joined the waters of the Ganga drop by drop.

As thoughts rush chaotically through Draupadi's mind late at night while Kunti sleeps, all images disappear and only a vacant immaculately white circle remains. It maddens Draupadi as she turns to one side fixing her gaze at the white nihility behind her closed eyelids and groans in pain 'mother.'

Kunti's guilt and the consequent albatross that Draupadi has to wear becomes the subject matter of another of Draupadi's nightmares. She hears an earth splitting sound as if something was striking noisily on a macrocosmic cauldron. She does not know whether she is awake or whether she is asleep with her eyes open. The sky seems to come down to the earth and at its crest shines a huge moon with a disc several times bigger than the ordinary. Draupadi stands in a position to touch the moon radiating in the dark blue night of the azure sky. In front is a mountain range of black rocks that extend as far as the eye can see. Here and there from the slopes rise rectangular rocks with painted edges high above like thickly grown cacti piercing the sky. Then these hemispherical rocky hills change into a universal temple encircled by numerous forts. Looking from below she gets scared at the sight of white clouds shining with red lines? Again the sound reverberates. What is the sound? Draupadi, frightened, realizes that it is the sound of her own words of indignation to Krishna before he had gone to Hastinapura to make a last attempt to negotiate peace just before the war commenced. The sound then gets transformed into the harsh message that Kunti had sent to Yudhishtira through Krishna urging him insistently to war after the peace mission failed. "Sounds revolve round the sky in an ever-accelerating speed. The whole universe gets heated by its impulse," and every sphere in it seems to be on fire. The colour of the blue moon changes to red and blood flows on the slopes oozing from the broken veins in the sky. She wants to cry out loud but how can her voice be heard in the

inflamed sky which has turned blood red. Draupadi watches the sight motionlessly with fearful eyes, her voice choked in her throat.

Just then a large eagle with wings spread out rises in the sky clutching a poor creature held between its legs. Soon the wings get red with blood and the bird alights with its huge nails digging into the stomach of this creature and dragging out its intestines. The writhing creature turns out to be Kunti and Draupadi realizes that the face of the eagle is that of Karna. As Kunti struggles in the last throes of death the kite rises, the entrails being entangled in its legs. It slowly encircles Draupadi's head and gradually starts to descend. Draupadi feels great satisfaction at the thought that now her entrails will also be scratched out by the kite, but as the bird comes close to her head, it lets loose the bowels from its nail. These fall on her neck with cold blood oozing from them. Draupadi roars and calls out "Mother." The whole nightmare seems to speak of peace turning into a bloody war, the searing guilt of Kunti and the dreadful burden that Draupadi would have to carry throughout her life till her antagonism to Karna would be transformed to understanding and compassion.

Draupadi's groan reverberates in the hut. Kunti springs up and trembles to see Draupadi's eyes expanded so much that they fill her sweating face. Grasping Kunti's knee with her hands, Draupadi weeps pressing her face down. Then, as if propelled with some energy, cries out,

Mother, why didn't you say to him at least once that he is your son? Why couldn't you avert this total disaster by revealing that he is your son?

Kunti's answer is even more unnerving. She shudders as she reveals to Draupadi that she had met Karna and revealed the truth to him before the war and asked him to join Yudhishtira. He would then be rightfully able to claim to the throne and would also become Draupadi's husband. Karna had refused because his gratitude to Suyodhana would not allow him to betray him but he promised to Kunti that she would always be the mother of five sons. He had kept his promise and that perhaps led to his death as he spared the lives of all the Pandavas except Arjuna. This knowledge was also the cause of Yudhishtira's nightmares and weariness with life.

Sanjay described to Yudhishtira the various points of time in the war when Karna had let each of the Pandavas go. Yudhishtira recalled with horror his delight at the death of Karna

which had given him at that time complete mental peace and unadulterated happiness. “Yudhishtira danced on seeing his beheaded body—yes—it was the most cursed day when the zest for fratricide devoured the whole earth.” The beheaded corpse of Karna moistened Yudhishtira’s eyes with remorse as he dreamt his terrible dreams through the darkness.

But if Kunti was a selfish mother and Draupadi had sacrificed her sons to her revenge, what of Gandhari? Surely she was the most virtuous and ascetic of women, a woman who deserved to be the mother to someone as noble as Karna, and yet she had been left without a single son to perform her last rites. Gandhari does not suffer nightmares but is bitten by a snake at night. She lies unconscious on the floor. Yudhishtira faints at the sight of her. Draupadi nurses him but feels no emotion. “At the climax of grief there ceases to be a condition of mental and physical torture. In a state of complete detachment...one can view all pains in the world including that of oneself as a single experience”. As Draupadi fans Yudhishtira mechanically, it starts a chain of thought in her and she feels like shouting aloud what Gandhari had said to Suyodhana: “where there is righteousness, there lies victory.” Gandhari’s life to her seems like an embodiment of “The cruelty of denying one’s desires for safeguarding ethical laws”. For all her asceticism Gandhari had only found sight for a moment to see the several heads and mutilated bodies of her children whose faces she had never seen. She laughs loudly at the sight of the fainted figures of Yudhishtira and Gandhari and then afraid of her own mental perversion, closes her eyes.

The shadowy figures of her bewildered mind seem to make loud noises. Her mind hurries along prohibited areas alienating even her. The black dots of grief transform its color and shape to worms of scorn. These crawl towards her and unhesitatingly find their way to the idols of holy eternal beliefs. The idols became diabolic. Eyes closed, she sees the worms piercing those beautiful idols and the totality of life that consecrates them. All life and everything that is held universally dear in it lies shattered and becomes powered and grotesque.

It seemed to her that all are scattered assuming new, distorted, strange shapes—like a human figure with heads in the place of legs, nose behind the head, eyes in the place of ears, the concept and incident of life are standing in front of her with terrible and ironic change of shape. Along with that a distressed cry and mad laughter rebounded to her throat simultaneously. In the violent effort of smothering it, she felt that she is also going to faint.

Brahmins conjectured that Gandhari was being punished because she had wanted to curse Bhima for deceptively killing Suyodhana. This makes Draupadi ask herself what is morality. It takes her back to their days in the forest when she had argued with Yudhishtira that there was no place in the world for truth and ethics. He had called her an atheist. She had shrunk in fear at that time but when at the end of the war all pious convictions lay scattered was she still be afraid to be called an atheist? Even Yudhishtira had been forced to rethink his ideas on what was moral when Draupadi had pointed out to him that the Kauravas, including Suyodhana, Dussasana and Sakuni had got heaven but Bhishma lay on a bed of arrows to see the horrible sight of putrefied dead bodies being eaten by worms. It makes Draupadi think

How much more terrible than death is the collapse of life's conceptions. The person whose conceptions have collapsed without any damage for life will turn into a cursed thing devoid of any desire either in life or death.

She reflects that death is not really a natural culmination of life. It is only a "sudden hindrance in the smooth music of life. The incomplete music will even then remain as incomplete music. But the life in which faiths and conceptions are smashed is only uncremated dead body sending out a stinking smell."

Draupadi's Nightmares

While Yudhishtira is left with a life filled with nightmares which he will never be able to shake off, Draupadi's nightmares help her to come to a resolution of her questions. Sitting outside her hut she watches the "pale dusk with torn cloth and disheveled hair," the sky frowning like an angry guardian. It is a frightening landscape:

on the terrifying face of intense black appeared in wrathful laughter the rows of white teeth which dazzled the horizons. Every heart shuddered. The bright flow of the river appeared to come to a standstill by that terrible shock. The sound of the sudden fierce wind added with the noise of torrential rain made the turbid waters beg for mercy with hands extended helpless in the sky.

As Draupadi brooded over her terrible loneliness, her ruined dreams stood as ghosts in front of her seemingly like tangible shapes which had made her even more alienated than the war. Memories raised their heads like little crabs—grotesque visions of Jayadrath who tried to forcibly drag her into his chariot; Keechaka who thrashed and kicked her in front of Yudhishtira when he failed in his attempt to molest her; Dussasana enjoying himself dragging her by her

tresses and disrobing her in front of her heroic husbands; Karna laughing ecstatically egging him on and reveling in her humiliation. Unable to cope with what she sees, she covers her eyes and shakes her head as if scorched by a flame. The more she tries to struggle against her bewilderment the more it expresses itself with terrifying clarity. That sound had filled her with poisonous hatred and now reverberated in the solitary darkness with “the unnerving sound of the foaming waters providing an orchestra for her frantic thoughts” that “suddenly came to a standstill” as Draupadi, became completely unaware of her surroundings and of the thick darkness that engulfed her.

These images of her humiliations recur repeatedly to Draupadi making her ask the question that echoes incessantly within her “Draupadi, were you ever loved for yourself, entirely for yourself?” She realizes that at no point of time in her life did the love of her husbands ever become such an overpowering passion that it would make them forget their other concerns and protect her. But she is at the same time quite aware that the mind can deceive why else would their days in the forest in retrospect appear to be a time of happiness? This makes Draupadi realize that there is a delicate relationship between the nature of pleasure and the nature of circumstances and happenings. Situations are coloured by the mind’s perceptions which are ever changing. For example, when Puru accepted his father’s old age, what should have been a cause for sorrow became the source of his spiritual happiness. Similarly the lifelong celibacy of Bhishma became his halo of glory and contentment. But Draupadi wonders, if Puru on regaining his youth had realized that his father was a wicked man or even worse, if he had discovered that he was not even his father, would it have affected any happiness that he may have experienced in the past years spent as an old man. And if it did, it could not be said to be a distortion of memory because the condition of that time itself would be distorted. It makes Draupadi understand that dwelling on her memories can turn into living misery hurting her self-respect as “The mind can disfigure not only the memories of past, but the past itself. The life of an unfortunate person whose mind extinguishes the light rays of the past will transform itself to darkness solidified without any bright spot. The whole life turns into a colorless vacuum without either glittering moments or frightening evils.” This is what Draupadi feels she has got reduced to and

is falling down headlong into a terrible ravine. The figures of those forbidding thoughts become fantastically bright. The question assumes intolerable clarity and tenseness.

With that, the bright past turns into a diabolically vindictive one. Draupadi realized that truth is cruel. Due to one tyranny, true thoughts torture the individual incessantly. The ferocious and cruel thoughts keep biting at the same point like leeches. Extracting blood from the wound they get expanded and fattened. Widening the mouth of the wound, it absorbs more and more blood.

In her moment of despair Draupadi, weak in body, weary in nerves and empty in mind, yearns for Krishna, her never failing refuge. He immediately seems to appear and come walking towards her. Who is Krishna and why is he her never-failing refuge? Does he actually stand for her own inner strength that lies between the layers of her surface turmoil? As he stands before her he explains to her that the source of her alienation is the overpowering grief of her husbands and of Kunti for Karna. For the first time she is not able to identify with their thoughts and so feels so intolerably empty that she finds herself alienated even from her own self. This she mistakes as being alienated from her kith and kin.

But continues Krishna, people have to see that there is a larger pattern in the cosmos beyond individual concerns. Men wrongly think that the whole course and movement of their life are their own creation and so enjoy their happiness and lament their sorrows. Similarly Draupadi who has become a stranger to herself has forgotten in her self absorption that there is a cosmic rhythm in nature of birth, growth and decay that is beyond her self absorbed grief. The sun rises in dawn, blazes at noon and then sinks into the sea in the evening. The foliage that he seemed to fondle in the morning, he burns at noon. This law of nature cannot be dismissed. Given the changing nature of existence, Krishna continues, Draupadi must understand that Karna truly deserved the status of the noble elder brother of Yudhishtira and hence Yudhishtira's grief for him was appropriate. Draupadi had seen Karna's face in the Kuru assembly at the worst moment of distortion and deterioration when he seemed like a wicked man laughing in mad intoxication at the sight of a renowned princess being disrobed in the assembly, but this was only a drop in the larger truth. The fateful acts of destruction performed by the unfortunate individuals were a part of what was preordained. Therefore, Karna had to act in the way he did to bring to fruition what was predestined: his own destruction and that of the entire Kuru race.

Krishna told Draupadi that not only Kunti had revealed to Karna his true parentage but that he too had met him before the war and told him the same thing. He had also tried to veer him away from Suyodhana. "All the five brothers will kneel down in front of you and pay their

obeisance. The five sons of Draupadi and also Abhimanyu will prostrate in front of you and will wear the dust of your feet in their forehead. The Kings gathered on the side of the Pandavas as well as their subjects will adore you as the most venerable eldest Pandava.” Everyone belonging to the Vrishni class including Krishna himself would be stationed behind him. Just as he had felt unable to accept Kunti’s suggestion, Karna declined Krishna’s offer too. Later even Bhishma lying on the bed of arrowshad asked Karna’s pardon for having hurt him all his life with uncharitable words. He wanted to wound his self respect so that Suyodhana would not drive the Kuru race to utter destruction relying on his powers. Bhishma accepts that Karna was always merciful and that there was no man on earth equal to him. He even at that late stage wanted Karna to join the Pandavas as their elder brother and end the war. Bhishma had realized that his whole life had been a failure and at the threshold of death he could “see only the naked distorted figures of the truths which were beautiful.” Was this he wondered, because selfish desires encircled what he thought were moral values. He acknowledges, “I observed evil deeds considering them as noble for the great aim I sought.” But Karna is unable to obey and can only seek his blessings for the path the he has chosen. He is reconciled to his fate.

On learning the truth about Karna, Draupadi tries to find some ease from “Thoughts that were scabbling the mind as ailments. Dark reflections are oscillating inflicting pain on itself. All of them are rotating on a single axis in terrifying speed.” She feels that the difference between her body that breathes and the dead body that is safely covered by sheets of ice” is negligible. New ideas dash in her mind as if she has lost her mental balance. As she relives her humiliation in the Kuru Court, she sees Karna reproaching himself for it. In front of her passes the vision of Karna sitting in the chariot with Krishna after rejecting the sovereignty of the world. Then comes Karna wielding the bow and arrow to break the target at the marriage altar. Finally emerges the picture of Karna enthroned surrounded by the other Pandavas. Repeatedly she sees herself as his royal consort while the other Pandava brothers pay obeisance to him.

Stung by self pity, Draupadi’s mind is caught up in the grip of regret and reproach as the question pertaining to her husbands and Karna circles her head like a vulture hovering over its prey. What was the basis of loving and being loved? The question has no answer. She has discovered the day before that shedid not even love her children. It made her repentant but what was repentance? It was the regret for something that was not done, perhaps for something that

could not be done. “It is an intense inability existing beyond all right and wrongs surfacing in the consciousness. The mind went to Kunti who could encircle the five Pandavas with the girdle of her love but not Karna. Could she have set afloat Yudhishtira or Arjuna? If Arjuna and not Karna had stood before Kunti, would she have denied him the knowledge of his parentage? As for herself Draupadi feels, perhaps it is not that she did not love her children. There was no place in her mind for anything else but revenge. The problem she realizes is not of preference. It is not even whether the object deserves to be loved. Due to some unknown reasons, not depending on a person’s will, the lamp of love glows permanently on certain points and does not light up others.

Fearful of dreadful dreams, Draupadi drove sleep away but still she saw dreaded sights in darkness. Arjuna rushing to kill Yudhishtira, Dhrishtadyumna holding the sword in his right hand and the profusely bleeding head of Drona in the other. The head of Drona got transformed into Yudhishtira’s and just then came a tall figure with a lifted sword. She then saw Bhima standing stunned devoid of his armour and weapons helplessly in front of Karna sitting on his chariot and laughing sardonically. She saw Yudhishtira, Nakul and Sahadeva fleeing for their lives from Karna who in any case had no mind to kill them. She felt no sympathy for anyone and the scene also did not cause her any pain.

The scene changed to show her a huge figure, dreadful and dark approaching Draupadi, revealing his canines and brandishing his sword. She laughs madly as the figure’s voice pierces the sky, “Draupadi, are you a chaste women?” She wakes up to find that Yudhishtira is sleeping uneasily but perhaps has not heard the sound which was probably only in her nightmare. Draupadi’s mind answers that while she has not broken the ideal of chastity even in thought her own question in whether she has ever been loved. Also, has she ever had a protector? Who had saved her from widowhood? These questions makes her break out in sweat. She feels suffocated inside, and runs out to the cold river bank in the dark where all is quiet dampened by the snow while the stars tremble in the sky.

Fate Draupadi muses, has made her life similar to Kunti’s in some respects. If Draupadi was the wife of the five Pandavas, Kunti too had sons from the gods of Sun and Wind and the King of Devas. As Draupadi’s life passes in front of her, she comes gradually to accept the bitter truth that it was a delusion for her to think that her husbands loved her because in her situation

how she could she ever get the complete love that a woman expects from a man and which forms the basis of honour for her. Also, she sees that everyone has been unethical, blinded by his ambitions which he has rationalized as his moral responsibilities. Hence, while she can harbour no hatred towards anyone, her life has been reduced to a shattered echo without a present or a future. It is then that she becomes aware of the snow falling on the Ganga. Wet, she looks up at the sky and sees that the stars that had earlier been scattered like dim coppery particles were glittering like blue gems. In front of her lies a wide barren land heated by sleepless ages. But she consoles herself that soon the sun will rise. On the banks of Ganga stand rows of huts. In them are all widows, lives without expectation. Draupadi feels that she has been more fortunate than them because unlike them she has experienced life at least in some of its aspects even if it has not been the pleasant comfort of love, there has been an intense light of righteous indignation and vengeance.

At the same time Draupadi cannot pray like those young widows with their thoughts concentrated on their loving husbands. Even widowhood was unattainable for her. She could never live like a wife, so she could not also become a widow. If Yudhishtira retired to the forest, she wonders, what would be her position? She could go with him but then how would the equilibrium of chastity be maintained for the wife of the Pandavas as she would be deserting the other four. If any of her husbands had died during the battle, would she have become a widow? Was it not because of the mercy of Karna that she was not a widow? But then came a revelation to her that she too was a widow among these widows and that her widowhood was as strange as her wifeness.

The Resolution

The sense of widowhood, as Draupadi's final nightmare indicates comes from the death of Karna. It is midnight and she prays for forgetful sleep. Tears trickle down from her eyes although she neither wants to cry nor does she realize that she is crying. She is frightened to hear herself shout "Don't do that Arjuna, don't do that." She sees a big circle of light with a reddish tinge in pitch dark background. Both Arjuna and Karna stand face to face ready to strike each

other. She is scared hearing the numbing sound of arrows piercing the muscles. Then arises a sight that she could not have believed even in her wildest dreams. She saw with anxiety and fear the figures of her dear children sitting comfortably on the broad shoulders of Karna, a ready target for Arjuna's arrows. With Prativindhya and Sutasoma on his right shoulder and Kritvarma, Sataneeka and Shrutseena on his other shoulder, it looked like a six headed Karna. Arrows from the Gandeeva whizzed past, aimed at the bosom of this six headed Karna and at all those heads. They surged like terrible snakes. Draupadi does not have the strength to speak the names of her sons but cries, "Don't do that Arjuna, don't do that."

Then Draupadi's neck is cleaved and she seems to be smashed to smithereens. She struggles to get up as if from a furnace but the dreadful spectacle of her own terrifying tragedy manifests clearly in front of her. "Looking into the pale face of life's realities, insolent illusions burst into laughter. Nightmares laugh hilariously at the sight of idols breaking down from holy altars. She wants to escape from the fear of darkness to the comfort of light. But her legs weigh heavy and cold ice flakes find their way to her head. Gathering all her strength she creeps along the roots on which she has been sitting and reaches up to the stem of that shady tree. As she sits wearily, the intertwining roots seem to writhe like snakes. Instead of keeping the tree firmly on the ground they seem to clutch it mercilessly trying to pull it down. As the tree struggles she wonders why her body too is writhing with that of the tree. Draupadi looks around with half open eyelids. The Sun seems to blaze in the blue sky occasionally changing into a shining black globe. The momentary changes of darkness and light are both unbearable to the eye. Draupadi again closes her eyes firmly pressing her body and head closely on the tree trunk entwined by the snake like roots that seem to send a frightened lament to the sky.

Finally through this intense churning of mind and body a sound penetrates her tired consciousness lovingly calling out "Draupadi". With great effort through half opened eyes she vaguely sees Yudhishtira as a shadowy figure reflected in troubled waters. She wonders why his fingers on her forehead feel cold like the snow. But as her heart absorbs the sound of his voice, her lips murmur: "Yudhishtira let me sleep." At last Draupadi seems to have found rest in the acknowledgement that Karna is indeed the eldest Pandava her protector and that of her children. This was, perhaps, also the end desired by all who had wronged him wittingly or

unwittingly – Kunti, Krishna and Bhishma and even by her own heart that she had not acknowledged or accepted up to then.

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