FIRE: THE ELEMENTAL NATURE OF DRAUPADI

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Fire: The Elemental Nature of Draupadī

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Abstract

My thesis focuses on the elemental characteristics of Draupadī, the heroine of the classical Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*. I examine key scenes from the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* that demonstrate Draupadī's link to the element fire, a link the epic makes, I argue, through the attribution to Draupadī of characteristics fire possesses according to Hindu thought; power, destruction, and purification. Draupadī's fiery characteristics often influence the plot of the epic significantly, and it becomes clear that these characteristics play a role in the grand cosmic scheme of the epic. Draupadī is among the instigators of the great war that causes massive destruction. However, this violent destruction occurs at the end of an age (yuga) and as part of the god Kṛṣṇa's divine plan and thus entails purification of the world prior to the beginning of a new age.

In the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī's association with fire begins from her birth from a sacrificial fire altar and colors her behavior throughout the epic, but her connection with fire is also emphasized and developed further in living traditions of worship of her as a goddess. Indeed, traditions of worship exist in which fire is an essential element in the nature of the goddess Draupadī, and in ritual observances centered on her, most notably the firewalking ceremony.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introductory Comments

This thesis examines Draupadī, the heroine of the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata* ("The Great Bhārata Clan"). Although Draupadī is directly involved in the main action of this epic infrequently, she nevertheless moves the plot forward at key points and is the center of the attention in some of the epic's most dramatic scenes. This thesis examines the connection between Draupadī and fire. Draupadi's birth from fire–specifically the fire of a sacrifical altar–is just one of the many ways the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* connects its heroine with fire and its characteristics. Living traditions that have developed around Draupadī repeat and enhance Draupadī's connection to fire both in their understanding of her nature and in ritual practice.

A similar argument could be made for Sītā, the main heroine of the other Sanskrit epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* or "The Tale of Rāma." She too, though not present in much of the action of the epic, moves the plot forward. Sītā has an elemental association as well, with earth, from which she is born. In both cases, Draupadī's and Sītā's, careful analysis of the subtleties of their epic characterizations can help provide a greater appreciation of these texts as literary works and as works of enduring religious and cultural significance.

The primary data for this thesis is the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata.* The approach adopted in the thesis's investigation is consistent with the current scholarly

trend to examine the Sanskrit epics as coherent literary works rather than collections randomly assembled over several centuries. For example, the central argument of the thesis focuses on the elemental associations in this version's depiction of Draupadī, one of which occurs in the epic's account of Draupadī's birth. However, this account occurs in passages that are considered by textual scholars to be later additions to the core text of the epic. But, instead of dismissing this account as a mythic addition without significance for the epic as a whole, I argue that the fiery nature of Draupadī informs the entire epic and as such, contributes to the epic's overall coherence.

A very similar argument could be made for Sītā in that her earthy nature likewise informs and lends coherence to the *Rāmāyaṇa*. However, an attempt to examine both heroines would be impossible in a Masters thesis. Though the thesis focuses on Draupadī, this introduction outlines the case for both epics to show that the technique is not only employed in the case of Draupadī, but occurs in both Sanskrit epics. Thus, the elemental character of the *Mahābhārata*'s heroine appears to be more than mere coincidence and more than a whim of the authors of that epic's classical Sanskrit version.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* are ancient narratives that have remained relevant to Indian audiences the world over without any foreseeable decrease in popularity to come. These narratives have been written, re-written, translated, interpreted, sung, turned into live action performances, and have even been transformed into feature films and television serials. They have an appeal that keeps people coming back to them. They offer up examples of model behavior, various

understandings of dharma, and representations of divinity. They are education and entertainment, religious and legal texts. They depict familial relationships and battles, demons and monkeys, and all things wonderful and frightening all at once. "The two great [Sanskrit] epics of India, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*, have the distinction of never having turned into dead if revered classics, and remain embedded in the living cultures of many Asian peoples, including those in various Asian diasporas" (Bose 2004, vii).

As literary works the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* are vast, both in size and in content. The epics present characters that warrant closer examination due to their historical and current import within Indian religion and culture, as well as their overall function as literary characters and the roles they play within the main story arc of the two epics. In both epics we are presented with heroines who have come to hold very different places within the complex tradition that is Hinduism and in the hearts and minds of Indians the world over. Although an examination of both heroines would be interesting and contain many parallels, in this thesis I am only able to focus on one of them, Draupadī the feisty heroine of the *Mahābhārata*.

Draupadī, the wife of the five Pāṇḍava brothers in the *Mahābhārata*, is a strong-willed woman who plays an integral role within the narrative. Arjuna wins Draupadī in an archery contest and she then ends up married to all five Pāṇḍavas. Eventually Draupadī is caught up in the rivalry between her husbands and their cousins: she is dragged before an assembly hall while menstruating, after her freedom has been lost in a gambling match. However, she escapes from a lifetime of abuse at the mercy of her

husbands' enemies and frees her husbands from slavery only to have her life altered once again when her husband, Yudhiṣṭhira, loses another bet. This loss sends Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas into a twelve-year forest exile followed by another year living incognito in a kingdom of their own choosing. Again and again Draupadī is insulted, and, desiring retribution for the injustice that she has to endure, she manipulates her husbands into action.

Draupadī is born from fire, appearing from within a sacrificial fire altar and the epic narrative attributes to her a fiery, passionate nature that, my thesis argues, shapes her behavior as a wife of the Paṇḍavas and as the heroine of the epic.

1.2 Introduction to the *Mahābhārata*

To understand Draupadī one must first become acquainted with the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, and the introduction offered here will focus on the specific version of it that provides the primary data for this thesis. In fact there are many versions of the *Mahābhārata*, but I only use the classical Sanskrit version of the *Mahābhārata* for practical reasons, but also because the classical Sanskrit version is accorded a certain priority and status within Hindu culture.

1.2.1 The *Mahābhārata* of the Sage Vyāsa

The classical Sanskrit text of the *Mahābhārata* is epic in both its content and voluminous proportions. It is generally accepted as the longest poem in the world and it boasts that all knowledge is contained within its encyclopedic bulk of nearly 75,000 verses (although tradition holds that it contains 100,000 verses) (Brockington 1998, 2).

The *Mahābhārata* is full of narratives and sub-narratives and claims to be comprehensive: "whatever is here, on Law, on Profit, on Pleasure, and on Salvation, that is found elsewhere. But what is not here is nowhere else" (*Mahābhārata* 1.56.34).[1]

It is impossible to assign a single author or date of composition to this text. However, tradition attributes its composition to the sage and seer Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa, who transmitted the narrative orally to Vaiśaṃpāyana (MBh 1.1.9).[2] Brockington points out that while Hindu tradition ascribes the *Mahābhārata* to the sage Vyāsa, this name means "arranger" or "complier" and he remains a mythological figure whose historicity is doubtful (1998, 28). It is possible that oral composition of the epic of the *Mahābhārata* was underway by 9th century BCE. However, most secular scholars agree that the oldest parts of the Sanskrit text date no earlier than approximately 400 B.C.E, and that the Sanskrit text itself has undergone many re-workings to the point where it is often difficult to discern the older layers from the newer as they are inextricably intertwined (Brockington 1998, 26).

The *Mahābhārata* contains many narratives that provide instructions for the characters of the main narrative. Some scholars have dismissed these narratives as extraneous material not essential to the epic. For example, John Brockington in his *The Sanskrit Epics* (1998) takes a historical approach to the epics, identifying and examining various phases of composition, but never examining how all phases work together to create a unified or coherent work. Other scholars look for and find connections

[1] All references to books 1 to 5 of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* will be from the van Buitenen translation unless otherwise noted.
[2] The *Mahābhārata* will be abbreviated in references as MBh for the remainder of the thesis.

between these narratives and the main epic story. Alf Hiltebeitel, in *The Ritual of Battle* (1990), treats the *Mahābhārata* as a unified text as does Arti Dhand in *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahābhārata* (2008).

The main narrative of the *Mahābhārata* tells the story of the Bhārata clan by detailing the origins of this family and all of the events leading up to the divinely assisted creation of the main characters of the epic, the five heroic Pāṇḍava brothers, Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīmasena (Bhīma), Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva and their shared wife Draupadī. The cousins of the Pāṇḍavas, the Kauravas, decide that they no longer want to share their kingdom with the Pāṇḍavas and so they attempt to assassinate them, but fail. The Kauravas then take advantage of a dicing match, through which the Pāṇḍavas end up losing their freedom and that of their wife. Draupadī is hauled into the assembly hall even though she is improperly attired and menstruating. The Kauravas attempt to strip Draupadī and so they incur her wrath. However, Draupadī then poses an unsolvable question regarding the dharma of the last round of the match. Because her question cannot be answered, she and the Pāṇḍavas have their freedom restored and the last round of the dicing match must be replayed. The Pāṇḍavas lose once again. This time, they have to go into exile for thirteen years, twelve years in the forest and one year in a kingdom living incognito. If the Pāṇḍavas complete this exile, the Kauravas agree they will return five villages of their original kingdom to them.

So, off to their exile go the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī. They complete the thirteen-year exile, but when they return to claim their share of the kingdom, the Kauravas refuse to turn it over. The brutal battle ensues and thousands are killed. The Pāṇḍavas

are victorious, if victory is the correct word to use when so many are dead. They rule their hard-won kingdom for thirty-six years and then die. With most of the characters dead and gone to heaven, the end of the epic marks the end of the *Dvāpara yuga* and the beginning of the *Kali yuga* (Hiltebeitel 1990, 28).

Draupadī appears in a few key scenes. Considering the volume of the *Mahābhārata* itself, her presence within the plot seems negligible. However, she is a very influential character and as the main heroine of the epic she shapes the direction that the plot takes. She is first presented as the devoted wife of the Pāṇḍavas. As the plot progresses and the freedom of all five of the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī herself is lost in the gambling match, she is the one who is dragged in front of the assembly hall and humiliated. She is the one who gains back the freedom of herself and her husbands. Once the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī have completed the twelve–year exile in the forest, they move into a kingdom to live incognito. Draupadī again is insulted and assaulted by a general of the king. It is, in part, because of the humiliation that she suffers that the Pāṇḍavas seek revenge and end up destroying their cousins. In fact, she, together with some of the Pāṇḍavas brothers, incites an indecisive, pacifistic Yudhiṣṭhira to action. Some of the most dramatic scenes involve her, often with her at the heart of them.

1.3 Thesis Statement

As a literary character Draupadī is important within the narrative of the epic. As such, a deeper analysis of her is helpful in order to discern how the epic characterizes her behavior, relationships, and roles. Draupadī is the devoted wife of five heroes,

indeed princes, who must endure lengthy forest exiles. She has a significant role in the development and resolutions of the central conflicts in the *Mahābhārata*. It is the abuse and humiliation of Draupadī in the gambling hall that leads to the development of the central conflict in the *Mahābhārata*. This conflict is only resolved after she incites her husbands to fight in a just war. She explains that it is Yudhiṣṭhira's dharma (duty) as king to fight his enemies and that she needs revenge for the injustice done to her. Her husbands resolve to fight the war and the battle is won by them, although it is a devastating war with many lives lost on both sides.

Draupadī's birth is unusual and elemental. Whereas some scholars would dismiss this extraordinary birth as a late addition to the epic, I will argue that the element that is the source of Draupadī informs the epic's characterization of its heroine. The same argument could also be made for Sītā, as her birth from a furrow in a field is also unusual and elemental. The circumstances surrounding these heroines' births have important differences as well as similarities. They were both born in unusual elemental circumstances in which no human mother was present. However, the element associated with the passionate Draupadī is fire, whereas the element associated with the calm, steadfast Sītā is earth.

The characters Draupadī and Sītā have much in common. They are both royal wives, they both were won at their self-choice ceremony in competitions that involved a bow and arrows, they both suffer hardships when they follow their husbands into forest exile, they are both kidnapped in the forest (in the case of Draupadī it is an attempted kidnapping), they are both born without mothers, and the births of both are

unusual and elemental. Despite all of these commonalities, outwardly they appear opposite: Draupadī is far more outspoken while Sītā is more reserved. Draupadī takes it upon herself to remove herself from situations where she is unhappy or uncomfortable, even if she has to incite one of her husbands to do this for her. Sītā, although unhappy in Rāvaṇa's kingdom, does nothing to remedy the situation. She does at one point contemplate suicide, but in the end waits for her husband to come rescue her, to give the glory of the rescue to her husband (Sutherland Goldman 2001, 231). At the end of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma questions Sītā's purity. In response to his doubts and accusations, Sītā swears that she has never thought of another man and asks for her mother, the earth, to take her home if this is true. The earth complies with the wishes of Sītā, a throne emerges from the earth on which Sītā sits and descends into the earth (*Rāmāyaṇa* 7.86.5-16 in Doniger 2010, 227).

In this thesis I will argue that Draupadi's birth from fire is no mere co-incidence, nor some insignificant dramatic or mythic embellishment. Rather, Draupadi's personality, behavior, and marital relationships have characteristics that, according to Hindu thinking, the element fire also possesses such as power, destruction, purification, and passion.

Similarly, an argument could be made that the account of the birth of Sītā from earth is part of a larger characterization offered in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Sītā as an earthy personality. Like the element from which she is born, Sītā is steadfast, strong, but passive. Her patient endurance of hardship, her defiant resistance of Rāvaṇa's propositions, and her steadfast devotion to Rāma help drive the plot to its climactic

battle between the heroic Rāma and the demonic Rāvaṇa. Furthermore, the elemental nature of each heroine is essential to the role each plays as a figure central to each epic.

Both female characters play integral roles in their respective epic. However, I will focus solely on Draupadī and demonstrate, through an analysis of key scenes depicting her, that the elemental association of Draupadī permeates the epic narrative, that this elemental characteristic shapes the direction of the storyline and that it informs living traditions of worship of Draupadī.

My analysis of the central female character in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* enhances our understanding of how Draupadī is viewed in the larger epic traditions; the many retellings, artistic depictions and worship practices associated with the *Mahābhārata*. Though my focus in this thesis is on the Sanskrit text rather than the larger epic traditions, this thesis also provides evidence regarding the significance of the fiery Draupadī beyond the Sanskrit text, in narrative, ritual, and festival traditions that have developed around the epic heroes and heroine.

1.4 Review of Literature

Any work with the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* requires reliable English translations and a skill-set that allows one to consult the Sanskrit texts. Reliable English translations of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* are available as will be described here.

For the *Mahābhārata*, I make use of the abridged translation by John D. Smith (Penguin Books, 2009). Smith, though summarizing much of the epic, presents complete translation of portions of the epic and offers translations of the entire eighteen books

based on the critical edition. This is a valuable source in that he uses chapter and verse numbers throughout which allows one to see exactly how much he is summarizing. The chapter and verse numbers used by Smith allow for an easy transition from his translation to the original Sanskrit. I also rely on the translation of the critical edition by J.A.B van Buitenen (University of Chicago Press, 1973-78). Van Buitenen died after only the first five books (about forty percent) of his *Mahābhārata* translation were published. James L. Fitzgerald now leads a group of scholars attempting to complete van Buitenen's translation, though the only volume published so far translates books 11 and 12 of the epic.

The Clay Sanskrit Library translation series has published books 2 to 12 (2005-09). I have made use of these even though most of the translations in this series are based on major rescensions rather than the critical edition. The translation by P.C. Roy (1962-63) is the only complete English translation of the Sanskrit text, but he used one of the major rescensions rather than the critical edition.

I have also consulted the original Sanskrit in the critical edition to ensure that all translation of passages discussed in this thesis accurately renders the Sanskrit vocabulary, without embellishment or figurative language not found in the original. My analysis frequently includes the specific Sanskrit terms as well as the English equivalents chosen by the translator.

1.4.1 The Critical Edition

There are many versions of the classical Sanskrit epics in existence, because of this it is essential to choose one as the source of the Sanskrit passages that I examine in

my thesis. I use the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* because it is an identifiable source that is also verifiable. The critical edition also records variant readings that I have consulted when required.

The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute at Poona completed the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* in 1970 (van Buitenen 1973, xxxi). To create the critical edition, a large team of scholars examined and evaluated hundreds of manuscripts. Attempting to identify the oldest and most authentic Sanskrit version, this board of scholars used historical linguistics, narrative coherence, widespread testimony, and grammatical correctness to construct the critically edited text.

However, there is debate over the authority of such a critical edition because it is a newly created version and one not represented fully by any single manuscript. Fortunately the critical editors did not discard variant readings and I have consulted the variants recorded. Resources like Roy's (1962-63) and Manmath Nath Dutt's (1987) translations (which use original texts other than the critical edition) also give access to variant readings that may have been excluded from the critical edition.

1.4.2 Secondary Sources on the Epic

There are many works of historical textual scholarship on the epics available. For example, John Brockington's (1998) book; Alf Hiltebeitel's works (1988, 1990, 1999, & 2001); and Wendy Doniger's (2009) book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. These are standard secondary sources for any study of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and the larger epic traditions.

1.4.3 Secondary Sources on the Epic Heroines in Sanskrit Texts and/or in Larger Epic Traditions

Arti Dhand's book (2008) is a recent text-historical study that discusses various aspects of marriage as represented in the *Mahābhārata* including the regulation and expectations of sexual relationships, the duty (dharma) of the male in marriage; and *pativratā* dharma (the duties of the devoted wife). Sally J. Sutherland's (1989) article compares the epic heroines by examining episodes featuring Sītā and Draupadī. Cornelia Dimmitt's (1986) article, Cristo Grottanelli's (1982) article, and a chapter in David Kinsley's (1989) book are all examples of secondary sources that have made arguments similar to the one that I develop more fully in my thesis.

Dhand, Sutherland, Dimmitt, and the other scholars listed above approach the epic texts in a holistic manner while still grounding their work in the epic's historical and cultural contexts. My approach to the epic is also holistic and historically grounded. I explore patterns woven throughout the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, patterns involving the connection between the heroine and the element from which she is born. The patterns are, however, interpreted within the historical and cultural context of the epic.

Finally there are a number of studies of the larger epic traditions and the way Draupadī is worshipped and understood within these epic traditions. Alf Hiltebeitel's two volume (1988 & 1991) work on Draupadī and Alleyn Diesel's article (2002), are examples of studies that describe living traditions centering on Draupadī. While this is not a major focus, I briefly examine these larger traditions (which are far too vast for

any single study) in an effort to demonstrate that the understanding of the elemental association of Draupadī extends beyond the epic text itself.

1.4.4 Scholarship on the Elements

For my analysis of Draupadī's fiery characteristics I draw upon works on the natural elements and how they are viewed and understood within Hinduism and Indian culture. The need to apply Indian understandings of the elements and their characteristics is vital because I do not wish to impose Western understandings of the elements on Indian texts. Relevant sources here include Chakravarti (1975) and Chapple (2000).

My topic–the elemental character of Draupadī–is unique in that the fiery nature of Draupadī has not been examined thoroughly. Various scholars have briefly mentioned this topic, but none offer a thorough examination of Sanskrit vocabulary and the details of the epic plotline, which I analyze in this thesis. Indeed, Brockington, looking toward the future of epic studies, says "The role of gender in the basic narrative framework of the epics – for example, in its use metaphorically for the relationship between the king and Earth – has not yet been explored at all systematically. Such symbolic aspects may well prove more rewarding to investigate" (1998, 520).

1.5 Methodology

My topic involves detailed examination of the classical Sanskrit version of the epic. Though my research relies heavily on translations of these works, I have consulted the original Sanskrit for all key passages. Using my knowledge of Sanskrit as a research

language, I consult the critical edition and its variant readings to identify and examine the range of meaning of key terms in the original Sanskrit text.

I approach the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* as a coherent literary work. As seen in the "Introduction to the Epics" and "Review of Literature" sections above, scholars have viewed the nature of the Sanskrit epics in one of two ways. The first view that scholars take is that each epic was gradually assembled during different historical periods. Scholars then locate separate fragments, identify them and their time and place of origin. Such an approach can be seen especially in Western scholarship on the *Mahābhārata*. Van Nooten, a scholar of the *Mahābhārata*, illustrates the negative consequences such an approach has had, particularly within Western scholarship:

> The literary world found it difficult to fit the *Mahābhārata* into any one of its already established literary categories. It is neither a purely religious work, nor is it a genuine epic, nor a romance, nor a philosophical treatise, but contains elements of all these Western literary forms, as well as others. Critics called it a "literary jungle," a "literary monstrosity." Serious students of Indian thought were appalled by the trite plots and obvious moral tendentiousness of some of its stories. On the other hand, the student of world literature despaired plodding through the *Mahābhārata*'s lengthy speculative passages. As a result, the *Mahābhārata* was fragmentized. Editions appeared of parts of it, such as the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the *Mokṣadharma*, philosophical treatises, and also lighter episodes, such as the *Nala* story, the *Sāvitrī* and occasionally the *Śakuntalā* story. The epic narrative proper was relegated to books dealing with Indian mythology and so it has become increasingly difficult to gain an appreciation of the *Mahābhārata* in the way it is viewed in India, as a unitary, complete work of art (van Nooten 1971, 1-2).

The second view considers the epics as complex but integrated works and seeks to understand the "context sensitive designs" that give even the *Mahābhārata*

coherence. A.K. Ramanujan, an Indian scholar and poet, calls for such an approach to Indian texts. He states that although Indian texts may be historically dateless and anonymous, their contexts, uses, and efficacies are explicit (Ramanujan 1990, 48). Scholars have often treated Indian texts as random compositions, with no real coherence. However, this approach should be reconsidered and perhaps replaced with an analysis of context-sensitive designs that demonstrate coherence within Indian texts.

> Scholars have often discussed Indian texts (like the Mahābhārata) as if they were loose-leaf files, rag-bag encyclopaedias. Taking the Indian word for text, *grantha* (derived from the knot that holds the palm leaves together), literally, scholars often posit only an accidental and physical unity. We need to attend to the context-sensitive designs that embed a seeming variety of modes (tale, discourse, poem, etc.) and materials. This manner of constructing the text is in consonance with other designs in the culture. Not unity (in the Aristotelian sense) but coherence, seems to be the end (Ramanujan 1990, 49).

An example of an argument in support of viewing the epics as unified whole appears in J.A.B. van Buitenen's introductory comments to his 1981 translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*. The *Bhagavadgītā* is found within the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, in book six. The *Bhagavadgītā* is often viewed as a significant religious text on its own. It is set on the battlefield on the eve of the great battle. It is a conversation between Arjuna, who is losing heart at the prospect of killing his family members and respected teachers, and Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna's charioteer and supreme deity in the text. The *Bhagavadgītā* is a discourse about *bhakti* (devotion) and how one can avoid accumulating

negative karma when doing one's dharma (duty) by devoting one's actions to the supreme divine being.

In the preface to his translation, van Buitenen discusses his translation of the *Bhagavadgītā* as part of the epic and that, even when it was published separately, he attempted to preserve the epic context of the episode (1981, xi). He felt that the placement of the *Bhagavadgītā* by the compliers of the epic was not a random choice for they could have found other places for the *Bhagavadgītā* if they were so inclined (van Buitenen 1981, 3). The *Bhagavadgītā* occurs where it does for excellent reasons; the composers allow us one last moment of stillness, before the immense destruction that occurs during the war, in which we see the reluctance of Arjuna and his acceptance of his dharma (van Buitenen 1981, 4). After a lengthy introduction to the *Bhagavadgītā* and its place within the *Mahābhārata* he says:

> To sum up: The *Bhagavadgītā* was conceived and created within the context of the *Mahābhārata*. It was not an independent text that somehow wandered into the epic. On the contrary, it was conceived and developed to bring to a climax and solution the dharmic dilemma of a war which was both just and pernicious. The dilemma was by no means new to the epic, nor is it ever satisfactorily resolved there, yet the *Gitā* provides a unique religious and philosophical context in which it can be faced, recognized, and dealt with (van Buitenen 1981, 5-6).

I have adopted the holistic view when examining the *Mahābhārata*. The first scene that I examine is the birth scene of Draupadī. Draupadī is born from a sacrificial fire altar created by her father so that he may obtain a son capable of defeating his enemy. After the offerings are made into the fire, an awe-inspiring, god-like youth rose

out of the fire. This is Dhṛṣṭadyumna, Draupadī's brother. Next, Draupadī comes forth from the center of the altar and a disembodied voice speaks and says that she will be the destruction of the barons (MBh 1.11.155.39-45). According to the historical analysis of the gradual composition of the text, the book in which this story appears is viewed to be a later addition, not essential to the epic. However, because I am approaching the epic as a unified text, I search for connections between the element that figures in the birth scene and the character and role of the heroine throughout the epic.

I use this holistic view to examine the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* as a literary phenomenon with a focus on strategies of character development. However, the character that I focus on is not simply a literary character; she has become a figure of religious significance within Hinduism. If this was the intent of the author at the time of composition, we will never know. Regardless, Draupadī has morphed over time into vital figure within Hinduism. The classical Sanskrit epic's careful development of Draupadī's fiery character is important to explore because it provides an insight into the religious significance of Draupadī within the lived traditions that have her as their central religious figure. It is helpful to look at literary construction of texts such as the *Mahābhārata* when trying to understand the religious significance of such texts and the characters in them. It is possible that the intricate construction of the classical texts themselves is a reflection of a long-standing sense of the importance of these stories and their characters, an importance and religious significance which in turn might have inspired later religious perspectives and practices.

1.6 Organization

This thesis is presented in five chapters: this introductory first chapter, the second chapter focusing on the textual associations of Draupadī herself with the characteristics of fire (power, destruction, and purification), the third chapter on the marital relationships of Draupadī, the fourth chapter on the larger epic traditions' treatments of Draupadī, and finally, the fifth concluding chapter that summarizes my arguments and offers concluding reflections about the fiery characterization of Draupadī.

Chapter two focuses on Draupadī and her links to the natural element, fire. I first present an overview on the fire element as understood in Hindu thought in texts and traditions contemporary with the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. I then examine all of Draupadī's key scenes, concentrating on details that draw upon or express a connection to fire. Draupadī's key scenes are: her birth scene (MBh 1.11.155.39-45), her appearance in the assembly hall (MBh 2.27.60.20-36), her protest over the injustice of her being brought before the assembly and her question regarding the lawfulness of her husband's actions in gambling her away (MBh 2.27.62.4-13), her defense of herself against a foreign king's attempt to kidnap her (MBh 3.42.251.19-252.24), and her defense of herself against the advances of general Kīcaka during the thirteenth year of the exile (MBh 4.13-16, Smith 2009).

Chapter three focuses on the relationships between Draupadī and her husbands. Since her identity as wife is so prominent, my analysis examines her marital

relationships to see what role her elemental character plays in them. Here, I focus on four scenes: Draupadī encouraging Yudhiṣṭhira to take action against the Kauravas (MBh 3.29.34-33.59), Draupadī inciting Bhīma to kill general Kīcaka (MBh 4.46.17.1-21.1), Draupadī advocating for war while her husbands seek peace (MBh 5.54.80.20-41), and Draupadī urging Yudhiṣṭhira to accept the kingship after the war (MBh 12.84.14.1-41).

The fourth chapter offers examples of the elemental association of Draupadī from the larger epic traditions of religious performance and worship based on the fieldwork of Alf Hiltebeitel (1988 & 1991) and Alleyn Diesel (2002). Drawing from Hiltebeitel's massive study of the cult of Draupadī in many locations from Andhra Pradesh to Tamilnadu, I describe those that develop Draupadī's connection with fire. Similarly, using Diesel's work on the Indian Amman tradition in South Africa (specifically, in Kwazulu-Natal), I again summarize the ways in which that Hindu community develops Draupadī's fiery nature. Both of these strong living traditions focus on Draupadī as a central religious figure, and both include ritual acts of firewalking.

The fifth and final chapter concludes the thesis, summarizing its main findings and commenting on themes found throughout my investigation.

Chapter 2: Textual Evidence of Draupadī's Association with Fire

2.1 Introduction

Draupadī, the heroine of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, is a unique female character within Indian literature. She is the shared wife of the five Pāṇḍava brothers who are the heroes of the epic's central narrative. The fact that she is the center of a polyandrous marriage is just one facet of her complex and compelling character. Draupadī, although infrequently at the forefront of the action, is integral to the plot of the epic. She moves the plot forward at key points and is involved in, if not the center of, some of the epic's most dramatic and important scenes. She is won in an archery contest by Arjuna and then through circumstances beyond her control ends up married to the five brothers. She is content with this marital arrangement and seems to do her best as a wife to each of them. Eventually she is caught up in the rivalry between her husbands and their cousins, is dragged before an assembly hall while menstruating, is humiliated and gambled away. By means of her own wits and cleverness she not only escapes from what would be an unpleasant existence at the mercy of her husbands' enemies, she also frees her husbands from slavery only to have her life altered once again when her husband, Yudhiṣṭhira, loses a bet. This loss sends Draupadī and her five husbands into a thirteen-year exile from their kingdom. For twelve years they must live in the forest, and then survive the thirteenth year living incognito in a kingdom of their choice. Draupadī must therefore live in a manner to which she is unaccustomed, first in

the wilderness and then as a hairdresser to a queen in a strange kingdom. Again and again Draupadī is insulted, and, desiring retribution for these injustices, manipulates her husbands into action.

As this chapter will show, Draupadī has a strong association with the fire element beginning from her birth and continuing throughout the entirety of the epic. Because the elemental character of Draupadī informs the entire epic, it represents one thread that helps tie the epic together. This furthers the work of current scholarship on Indian epics, which views the *Mahābhārata* as a complex but integrated work and seeks to understand the "context sensitive designs" that give even the *Mahābhārata* coherence.

The five elements are described in systems of Hindu philosophical thought such that each element possesses unique characteristics and properties. The Sāṃkhya school of philosophical thought, a school that developed during the period of composition of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, provides an important Hindu perspective on the characteristics of fire and the other elements. Sāṃkhyan ideas can be found in several Indian texts including the *Upaniṣads*, *Purāṇas*, and the *Mahābhārata* itself (Chakravarti, 1951). The epic is aware of the existence of the Sāṃkhya philosophy (Chakravarti 1951, 56), and so it is this understanding of the elements that will be used to identify the fiery nature and attributes of Draupadī. Sāṃkhya is a philosophical system that splits all of reality into two coeternal principles: spirit (*puruṣa*) and primordial matrix (*prakṛti*) (Glucklich 2008, 70). The fundamental characteristics of *prakṛti* are the three *guṇas*, which are *sattva*–characterized by pleasure and illumination, *rajas*–characterized by

pain and actuation, and *tamas*– characterized by indifference and restraint (Larson 1979, 162). These *guṇas* pervade the entire manifest world from will or intellect down to the five physical elements (Larson 1979, 162). The five physical elements are among the manifestations of *prakṛti* and are earth, wind, water, space, and fire (Larson 1979, 188). In the Sāṃkhya system of thought, the properties of fire are: upward movement, purification, burning, cooking, lightness, brilliance, destruction, power, and lustre (Chakravarti 1951, 246). I also follow what the epic itself presents on the subject of fire, paying close attention to word choices and associations in the Sanskrit text.

The power and destructive characteristics of fire are overt and, perhaps because they are empirically obvious, are recognized in many cultures. We can see that fire burns, destroys, and is therefore powerful. Even metaphoric applications of these characteristics to human emotions such as anger are not unique to Indian or Hindu contexts. However, the purifying aspect of fire is not something that is as readily apparent and seems to be more specific to particular cultures. Within Hinduism, the god Agni is identified with fire itself in all its manifestations. As the sacrificial fire in Vedic ritual, Agni is the receptacle in which sacrificial offerings are placed to be delivered to the gods, for this god is also the intermediary between humans and gods (Lipner 2010, 34). Agni (as fire) purifies the offerings before delivering them to their divine recipients (Lipner 2010, 34). Fire's power of purification is important also in funeral rituals and cremation. Through cremation, fire purifies (as it consumes or destroys) the body of dead and transports the deceased to another realm in preparation for rebirth (Lipner 2010, 44). As such, the purification characteristic of fire is important

within Hindu ritual contexts and is therefore more culture specific than characteristics such as destruction.

Draupadī is born from fire, appearing from within a sacrificial fire altar and the epic narrative attributes to her a fiery, passionate nature that shapes her behavior as a wife of the Paṇḍavas and as the heroine of the epic. This fiery, passionate nature comes through in several of Draupadī's key scenes and episodes that will be the focus of the present chapter: her birth (MBh 1.155.39-45)[3]; the humiliation of Draupadi in the assembly hall (MBh 2.60.25-36) and her responses to this injustice (MBh 2.62.4-13); Draupadī's defense of herself against a lustful king's attempt to kidnap her (MBh 3.251.19-252.24); and Draupadī's defense of herself against the sexual advances of general Kīcaka of the Virāṭa kingdom (MBh 4.46.13-15).

2.2 Textual Associations with Fire: Power and Destruction

Draupadī's birth scene is perhaps the one scene where her association with fire is most obvious. She emerges from a fire altar created by her father, king Drupada, so that he could make ritual offerings to the gods to obtain a son with the power to destroy his enemy. First the desired male emerges resembling a god, having the coloring of fire, bearing arms and shield (MBh 1.155.37). Upon his birth, a voice from the sky says,

> 'This fear-averting prince, who shall raise the fame of the Pāñcālas and dispel the king's grievance, has been born for the destruction of

[3] All references to books 1 to 12 of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* in English translation will be from the van Buitenen translation unless otherwise noted.

> Droṇa [*jāta eṣa droṇavadhaya*]'[4]; thus spoke a great being invisible in the sky (MBh 1.155.39).

The birth of Dhṛṣṭadyumna parallels that of his sister, Draupadī, and this parallelism implies that Draupadī is a direct cause of destruction just as her brother is the direct cause of the destruction of king Drupada's enemy, Droṇa, who is an ally of the Kauravas. In both cases, a voice from the sky foretells their destructive feats.

> Thereupon a young maiden arose from the center of the altar, the well-favored and beautiful Daughter of the Pāñcālas, heart-fetching, with a waist shaped like an altar. She was dark, with eyes like lotus petals, her hair glossy black and curling – a lovely Goddess who had chosen a human form. The fragrance of blue lotuses wafted from her to the distance of a league, the shape she bore was magnificent, and no one was her peer on earth. And over the full-hipped maiden as soon as she was born the disembodied voice spoke: 'Superb among women, the Dark Woman shall lead [*ninīṣati*] the baronage to its doom [*kṣayaṃ*]. The fair-waisted maiden shall in time accomplish the purpose of the Gods [*surakāryam*], and because of her, great danger shall arise for the barons [*asyā hetoḥ kṣatriyāṇāṃ mahādutpatsyate bhayam*].' (MBh 1.155.40-45).

Both Draupadī and her brother Dhṛṣṭadyumna emerge, as adolescents, from a sacrificial fire altar. We are given a description of Draupadī's beauty, lustre and appeal. She is portrayed here as a beautiful prize, possessing great loveliness and wonderful aroma, but also as a destructive female. Dhṛṣṭadyumna, the intentional product of the ritual, is hailed as the one to bring Droṇa to destruction (*jāta eṣa droṇavadhaya*), while Draupadī, the unintended product of the ritual, is hailed as the one to perform the will of the gods and bring doom to the whole race of warriors and, with her as the cause (*hetoḥ*), great

[4] All references to the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* text will be from the Critical Edition compiled by the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute unless otherwise noted.

fear or danger will arise among them (*asyā hetoḥ kṣatriyāṇāṃ mahadutpatsyate bhayam*). Furthermore, in identifying Draupadī as the one who will bring "the baronage to its doom [*kṣayaṃ*]," the text uses a future verbal form in the active voice: she shall lead [*ninīṣati*].[5] Thus, the vocabulary and grammar suggests that Draupadī is not just the passive instrument of the destruction of the *kṣatriya* (baronage/warrior) caste, but she herself is the one who "shall lead" them to "doom" or "destruction" (*kṣayaṃ*). The passage is therefore foreshadowing the devastation and destruction of the war to come; a war that stems in part from the events surrounding the gambling match and injustice Draupadī endures during the match. Though she is not directly involved in the action on the battlefield herself, she is one of the causes of the war.

Of course, the clearest association with fire in this passage is the fact that Draupadī emerges from the fire and in itself this might indicate that fire is essential to her nature. The Sāṃkhyan position on the relationship between cause and effect is *satkāryavāda*, a theory of causation that asserts that the effect is preexistent in the cause (Larson 1969, 10): "that is, the effect is nothing new; it is simply a modification of that which is already present in the cause" (Larson 1969, 178). The Sāṃkhyan position of the effect pre-existing the cause implies that from fire comes that which is essentially fire. Therefore, Draupadī is a modification of fire emerging from fire. As well, Draupadī's birth seems to be accidental since it was not the intended outcome of the ritual. The birth of her brother, Dhṛṣṭadyumna, was the prize that Drupada sought. Draupadī emerges after and as such her birth is uncontrolled and perhaps this uncontrolled birth

[5] All meanings of Sanskrit terms are from Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary (1899) unless otherwise noted.

reflects her fiery qualities. Whatever the case, her birth from the sacrificial fire appears to have been understood by the epic authors (and audiences, as will be discussed in chapter four) to influence her nature and personality.

The next episode to be examined is one of Draupadī's most dramatic scenes in the entire epic. Further, as the discussion will show, the epic continues to associate Draupadi herself and the effects she has on others with the element of fire and its effects. In the second book of the epic, the "Book of the Assembly Hall," Draupadī is humiliated and outraged when she is forcefully dragged into the royal assembly hall against her will. It is through this episode that the epic's audience first sees Draupadī's personality and her powerful fiery nature.

During a dicing match with the Kauravas, Yudhiṣṭhira wagers both the freedom of his brothers and that of himself and loses. He then wagers the only thing that he has remaining, the freedom of his wife. Once again fortune does not favor him and all is lost. Duryodhana, the leader of the Kauravas, summons Draupadī to the assembly hall and sends Duḥśāsana to fetch her. Draupadī runs to the women of the king, for protection but to no avail. Duḥśāsana grabs her by her long black hair and drags her into the assembly hall. She initially responds rather quietly, as one might expect of a married woman and princess. She "whispered softly" to Duḥśāsana, however as her anger intensifies she becomes more vocal in her righteous indignation.

> And as she was dragged, she bent her body
> And whispered softly, 'It is now my month!
> This is my sole garment, man of slow wit,
> You cannot take me to the hall, you churl!' (MBh 2.60.26)

Duḥśāsana shakes her about by the hair and tells her that no matter who she cries out to for help and regardless if she is wearing one cloth or none, she has been made a slave and he will take her to the assembly hall (MBh 2.60.27). The text then presents Draupadī as humiliated and righteously outraged at being treated in such a manner. Against her will and while she is menstruating, she is being taken into an assembly hall filled with men, many of whom she respects and admires, to be a slave to her husbands' enemies who attempt to strip her naked.

> Her hair disheveled, her half skirt drooping,
> Shaken about by Duḥśāsana,
> Ashamed and burning [*dahyamānā*] with indignation [*amarṣeṇa*],
> She whispered again, and Kṛṣṇā [Draupadī] said,
>
> 'In the hall are men who have studied the books,
> All follow the rites and are like unto Indras.
> They are all my *gurus* or act for them:
> Before their eyes I cannot stand thus! (MBh 2.60.28-29)

The text connects anger and fire. The link between fire and anger occurs frequently within the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, where fiery language is often used to describe a character that is enraged. Passions like anger are also classed as the emotions associated with *rajas* (activity or energy) in Sāṃkhyan thought (Larson 1979, 10; 163). Fire also possesses the qualities of *rajas*, for example, heat, energy and activity. When Draupadī is angry she often "burns" or is "burning [*dahyamānā*]" with righteous rage. Draupadī's fiery passion and power are demonstrated as her temper flares and she hurls insults at Duḥśāsana. She directly accuses Duḥśāsana of being an "ignoble fool of cruel

feats"(MBh 2.60.30), she calls him a "man of slow wit" (MBh 2.60.26) and a "churl" (MBh 2.60.26).

Draupadī focuses on questions of dharma (law), not only on her hurt feelings, but on larger issues of honor and justice, issues explored throughout the epic. She says that Duḥśāsana doesn't know the dharma, that his actions are cruel and will not be supported by the men in the assembly hall, men who know dharma but they are also targets of her anger since they do nothing but watch her humiliation:

> 'You ignoble fool of cruel feats,
> Don't render me nude, do not debase me!
> These sons of kings will not condone you,
> Were Indra and Gods to be your helpmates!
>
> 'The king, son of Dharma, abides by the Law [dharma],
> And the Law [dharma] is subtle, for the wise to find out:
> But even at his behest I would not
> Give the least offence and abandon my virtue. (MBh 2.60.30-31)

Thus Draupadī continues by emphasizing the base nature of the act of dragging her into the assembly hall, an act that goes against dharma performed by cruel men and ignored by unlawful men (MBh 2.60.32-34). Draupadī bases her anger on their violations of dharma and neglect of the punishment warranted by acts that are adharmic (immoral or unlawful).

She is fiery in her words and actions, and the Sanskrit vocabulary refers to fire and its characteristics. As she is being dragged into the assembly hall the text describes her as burning (*dahyamānā*) with anger (*amarṣeṇa*) (MBh 2.60.28). She is not just angry; she is so consumed with the feeling that she is burning with it. The language used as

the text's description continues suggests her anger is a physical thing that moves through space and encloses objects as fire might, she throws her scornful glances at her husbands, and the limbs of the Pāṇḍavas are wrapped with wrath:

> As she piteously spoke the slim-waisted queen
> Threw a scornful glance [*apaśyat*] at her furious husbands
> And inflamed [*saṃdipayāmāsa*] with the fall of her sidelong glances,
> The Pāṇḍavas, wrapped with wrath [*kopaparita*] in their limbs (MBh 2.60.35)

Draupadī's anger continues to be presented as a physical thing. The fury of her glace causes pain to the Pāṇḍavas:

> Not the kingdom lost, not the riches looted,
> Not the precious jewels plundered did hurt
> As hurt that sidelong glance of Kṛṣṇā,
> That glance of Kṛṣṇā sent in fury (MBh 2.60.36).

The looks that Draupadī gives to her husbands while she is giving her passionate speech about the injustice of being dragged into the hall against her will while those present just sit there passively watching, are contemptuous and provoke rage within each of them. She is calling them to action, not directly with her words, but in the sidelong glances of an enraged wife. Furthermore, Draupadī's anger is righteous or dharmic, since she bases it on dharma and its righteousness is confirmed later when the old king supports her cause. Her anger, based on dharma, is thus legitimized in the epic. However, female anger is rarely legitimized in religious texts. *The Law Code of Manu*, for example, directs wives to be "always cheerful, clever at housework, careful in keeping

the utensils clean, and frugal in her expenditure" (5.150).[6] A woman who "controls her mind, speech, and body" is called a good woman (*The Law Code of Manu* 5. 165). Yet, Draupadī's anger is dharmic in that she uses dharma to provide justification for her anger. She knows that her husbands, followers of dharma, are aware that what is being done to her goes against dharma and so by casting angry looks at her husbands, she hurts and "inflames" them. That they are "hurt" by her glances also indicates the power of her glance. She wants them to act on her behalf and in her defense, but all except for Bhīma sit passively by, as ineffectual husbands at the mercy of the Kauravas.

The power that Draupadī possesses to influence her husbands' behavior is clearly demonstrated here. With scornful glances cast at them and an angry speech, she is able to inspire wrath within them and while not all of them jump to action, Bhīma comes to her defense as he often does. He directs his anger at his brother Yudhiṣṭhira, since it was he who gambled away Draupadī's freedom and the reason behind her humiliation.

It is interesting and curious that the text continues its use of fiery vocabulary and imagery as it describes the effects of Draupadī's fiery anger on the temperamental Bhīma. In fact, the text goes beyond the conventional use of images of fire for anger. Bhīma says; "It is because of her [*asyāḥ kṛte*] that I hurl my fury at you! I shall burn [*saṃpradhaksyāmī*] off your arms! Sahadeva! Bring the fire!"[7](MBh 2.61.6).

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[6] The version of *The Law Code of Manu* used here and throughout the remainder of this thesis is The Oxford World Classics version based on the critical edition translated by Patrick Olivelle (2004) unless otherwise noted.

[7] *asyāḥ kṛte manyurayaṃ tvayi rājannipātyate | bāhū te saṃpradhaksyāmi sahadevāgnimānaya ||*

Saṃpradhaksyāmī is a future tense, and means, "will burn off completely," or "will burn to ashes" (Monier-Williams). It is Bhīma's weapon of choice here, fire, that is highly curious. He undoubtedly would have access to a host of other modes of destruction, his size and strength being the most obvious choice. However, it is fire that he calls for. His threat to "burn off" Yudhiṣṭhira's arms is not an idle one. The fact that he requests that fire be brought to him suggests that he is willing to carry out this threat. His anger, "inflamed" by Draupadi's, has become so intense that it has inspired him to make use of the power of fire.

Draupadī's feisty personality is again evident when she, in front of all the men present in the assembly hall, laments the injustice done to her and questions the lawfulness of the actions of her husband, Yudhiṣṭhira, when had he gambled away her freedom after losing his own and all of his brothers' freedom. Here we once again see the powerful, willful personality of Draupadī shine through in her passionate speech. This scene presents Draupadī's fiery nature through the words and actions of Draupadī herself. She demonstrates her power by refusing to let her molestation go ignored. She demands an answer to her vital question and will not be quiet until she receives satisfaction. Her question, regarding the legitimacy of Yudhiṣṭhira wagering her freedom after he had wagered and lost his own, cannot be answered and the last rounds of the dicing match must be replayed. But, for Draupadī, she has saved herself and her husbands from slavery to the Kauravas. Here we once again see the powerful, willful personality of Draupadī shine through in her passionate speech. She knows dharma and as such knows that a she has suffered a terrible injustice.

In the assembly hall, a number of men view Draupadī while she is menstruating, which according to *the Law Code of Manu* is an impure state (4.41; 4.57; 4.208; 5.108). In the Hindu social structure "female sexual fluids are regarded as highly polluting, and during menstruation and immediately following childbirth, women are excluded from normal social contact and are banished from the kitchen lest they pollute the food" (Kinsley 1993, 137). While menstruating, women must observe many rules to insure that others will not come in contact with them (Kinsley 1993, 164). For example, for five days a woman may not serve food to her family or eat with them, the clothes she wears during her menstruation are also very polluting and must be handled carefully to avoid contaminating her family (Kinsley 1993, 164). Therefore, being dragged into the assembly hall in this condition is improper and a source of humiliation for Draupadī.

However, not only is she menstruating, Draupadī is also being manhandled by one of the Kauravas and brought before an assembly of men. She says,

> The Kurus allow – and methinks that Time is out of joint – their innocent daughter and daughter-in-law to be molested! What greater humiliation than I, a woman of virtue and beauty, now must invade the men's hall? What is left of the Law [dharma] of the kings? From of old, we have heard, they do *not* bring law-minded women into their hall. This ancient eternal Law [dharma] is lost among the Kauravas (MBh 2.62.7-10).

It is here, in this scene where she demands that her all-important question be answered; is she indeed to be made a slave when her husband has already lost his own freedom? She knows what is being said to her and what she is being told to do and yet she challenges it, she questions the validity of it; she wants to know if it is indeed

dharma. She is correct to question the validity of the actions of her husband. One who has already gambled away his own freedom cannot freely gamble away another, and thus, she is vindicated and the dicing match is replayed.

> Is the wife of the King Dharma whose birth matches his, a slave or free? Speak, Kauravas. I shall abide by your answer. For this foul man, disgrace of the Kauravas, is molesting me, and I cannot bear it any longer, Kauravas! Whatever the kings think, whether I have been won or not, I want it answered, and I shall abide by the answer, Kauravas (MBh 2.62.11-13).

She is humiliated, yet she refuses to bow her head and let an injustice go without question. Her humiliation does not cower her, it has the opposite affect; it gives her a sense of empowerment. Again her fiery nature is evident in her personality, as it continues to be in the following passages.

As the examples discussed so far demonstrate, the text often uses words that link Draupadī with fire; not just in its descriptions of her and her own actions, but also in the text's accounts of other characters' descriptions of her and events surrounding her. Shortly after the scene in the assembly hall there is a scene in which worry has beset the old king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the father of the Kauravas, and he shares his grief about the events that occurred in the assembly hall with one of his men, Saṃjaya. Dhṛtarāṣṭra says "Duryodhana and Karṇa in the assembly threw biting insults at the suffering Kṛṣṇā [Draupadī], angry and defiant. Earth herself would burn [*pradahyeta*] under her wretched eyes – would anything have been left of my sons, Saṃjaya?"(MBh

2.72.18).[8] Here he is referring to the wretched eyes of Draupadī having enough power and anger in them to burn the earth.[9] He seems to be implying that since the very earth itself would burn under her glare that she could have completely destroyed his sons right there and then in the assembly hall. Clearly, the text, here through the voice of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, links Draupadī and the destructive power of fire.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra's description continues. His words present the reader with a further link between Draupadī and fire when Dhṛtarāṣṭra describes events that occurred as Draupadī was brought into the assembly hall. Fire in one form or another is active in almost every one:

> All the women of the Bhāratas, who had gathered with Gāndhāri, cried out in anguish when they saw Kṛṣṇā brought into the hall. No *agnihotras* were offered up that evening, for the brahmins were enraged over the molestation of Draupadī. There was a grisly rumbling in the earth, and a fierce hurricane rose. Horrible meteors fell from the sky, and out of season Rāhu swallowed the sun, driving the people into a horrific panic. Fire [*hutāśanaḥ*] appeared in the chariot stables and the flagmasts crumbled, spelling disaster for the Bhāratas (MBh 2.72.19-22).

Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the father of the tormentors of Draupadī, presents a list of negative and destructive consequences caused by the molestation of Draupadī in the assembly hall. Fire is presented in this passage in three forms, ritual fire (*agnihotras*), the sun, and fire. *Agnihotras*, obligatory ritual sacrifices made into fire, were not made when Draupadī was molested, the moon eclipsed the sun during the incorrect season, and "Fire

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[8] *tasyāḥ kṛpaṇacakṣurbhyām pradahyetāpi bhedinī| api śeṣam bhavadadya putrāṇāṃ mama saṃjaya||*

[9] The verb used for burn here is *pradahyeta*, which is optative and thus translated as "would burn" (Monier-Williams).

[*hutāśanaḥ*] appeared in the chariot stables and the flagmasts crumbled, spelling disaster for the Bhāratas" (MBH 2.72.22). Thus another link appears in the text between the destructive element fire and Draupadī in that fire or the god of fire, Agni, appears in response to her distress. There is chaos in nature, ritual, and among people and animals as a result of the molestation of Draupadī. Furthermore, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's entire speech here foreshadows the much larger scale destruction of the war between the Paṇḍavas and their cousins, the Kauravas. The kind of apocalyptic language used by Dhṛtarāṣṭra to describe the effects of Draupadī's wrath is an effective foreshadowing for a war that brings the destruction characteristic of the end of a yuga, when fire does indeed burn the earth and all on it (Hiltebeitel 1990, 310-311; 328).

Another example of the text using language that links Draupadī with the destructive power attributed to fire occurs when, after the events of the assembly hall have taken place and the Paṇḍavas have gone to the forest, Vidura, a dharmic sage, says to Dhṛtarāṣṭra "This signifies your end, Bhāratas, that Kṛṣṇā [Draupadī] went into your hall"(MBh 2.72.27).[10] Her very presence in the hall signifies the end of the Bhāratas, she may not be the physical agent of their destruction, but she is the force behind it.

In this next scene, which features a conversation between Draupadī and Yudhiṣṭhira, the epic again associates Draupadī herself and the effects she has on others with the element of fire and its effects. Draupadī's association with the destructive function of fire is most prominent during the conversation about anger and revenge that she has with her husband Yudhiṣṭhira after they have been banished to the forest

[10] *etadantāḥvstha bharatā yadvaḥ kṛṣṇā sabhāṃ gata||*

(MBh 3.28-33). Draupadī wonders why his anger has not increased after he has been stripped of his kingdom and banished to the forest with his brothers and wife. She discusses the stark contrast between what their life once was and what it had now become and marvels at Yudhiṣṭhira's lack of outrage at their current situation. She wonders why the sight of Arjuna, who is so used to comfort and so unused to hardships, now exiled in the forest, does not cause anger to rise in Yudhiṣṭhira. She says "On his single chariot he defeated Gods and men; now you see him banished to the forest-why doesn't your anger [*manyurna*] [grow]?" (MBh 3.28.27).[11] *Manyurna* means spirit, mind, mood, mettle, high spirit or temper, ardor, zeal, passion; rage, fury, wrath, anger, and indignation and is often personified as Agni, Kāma, or Rudra (Monier-Williams), all of whom are fiery and or passionate gods. In this case, she tries to create an emotion within Yudhiṣṭhira that does not appear to be there. She attempts to rouse his anger over the injustice done to all of them, not only to her. This scene will be discussed in more detail in chapter three, which focuses on the marital relationship between Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas.

The next episode in which Draupadī's fiery nature is portrayed occurs during the forest exile when Jayadratha Vārddhakṣatri, the king of the Sindhus, attempts to kidnap her. When he first sees Draupadī, her beauty instantly enamors Jayadratha. He asks a prince who is accompanying him, Koṭikāśya, to find out who she is. Koṭikāśya asks her in words that compare her to fire in several ways. He says,

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[11] *yo devāṃśca manuṣyāṃśca sarpāṃścaikaratho 'jayat| taṃ te vanagataṃ dṛṣṭvā kasmānmanyurna vardhate||* Here, van Buitenen uses "flare up" to translate *vardhate* and so adds fiery imagery that is not obvious in the Sanskrit. *Vardhate* is from the root *vṛdh*, which means increase, grows, rise, etc.

> Who are you that bend a *kadamba* branch,
> Alone in the hermitage, lighting it up,
> Ablaze like the flame of a fire in the night,
> With your lovely brow, that is fanned by the wind? (MBh 3.249.1)[12]

Here she is said to possess the physical attribute of glowing or blazing (*dedīpyamāna*) like a flame (*sikhā*) of fire (*agni*). Here, the text uses the image of fire to describe the beauty of Draupadī and this metaphoric use of the vocabulary of fire is perhaps more specific to Indian and Hindu culture than fire imagery for anger. Indeed, fire as a metaphor for female beauty seems unusual even in Indian and Hindu literature[13] (MBh 1.61.96-97). Koṭikāśya then returns and tells Jayadratha who Draupadī is. When Jayadratha sees her he becomes enamored by her beauty and lusts after her. Jayadratha propositions her, asking her to leave her husbands and become his wife. Draupadī is appalled by his proposition, being the virtuous, law-knowing woman that she is.

> At these heart shattering words of the king of Sindhu, Kṛṣṇā strode away, knitting her brow. Contemptuously the slender-waisted Kṛṣṇā ignored his words and said, 'Don't speak like that!' to the Saindhava, and 'Shame on you!' Expecting her husbands to return presently, the blameless lady spun out words in order to distract the other (MBh 3.251.19-20).

This brief passage shows the beginning of Draupadī's anger, which grows as she chastises the ignoble king for speaking in such a way. Her anger rises as she prepares to deliver her passionate speech:

> With her lovely face now crimsoned with anger,

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[12] *koṭikāśya uvāca| kā tvaṃ kadambasya vinamya śākhāmekāśrame tiṣṭasi śobhamānā| dedīpyamānāgniśikheva naktaṃ dodhūyamānā pavanena subhruḥ||*

[13] See for example, MBh 1.61.96-97 for a more conventional description (see pp. 48).

Her eyes blood-red, her brows raised and knit,
She snorted at the king of Suvīra,
And Draupadī's daughter said to him, (MBh 3.252.1)[14]

The anger that Draupadī possesses is now evident in her face, her eyes are red (*sarāganetreṇa*) and her brows are raised and knit or furrowed (*natonnatabhru*). Her anger becomes physically evident as she defends herself using a powerful and passionate speech. Draupadī chastises Jayadratha for insulting her great husbands (MBh 3.252.2-4). She continues by saying that his attempt to seduce her is pointless and through it, he has unwittingly brought the fury of the great Pāṇḍavas upon himself (MBh 3.252.5-8). She says that to take her, who is under the protection of these great heroes, is a death wish (MBh 3.252.9).

Here we see Draupadī get angry at the words of the king and produce a powerful and passionate speech about the glories and strengths of her husbands. Battling them for her would be an exercise in futility for they cannot be conquered. Jayadratha responds to this speech by simply saying that this threat is not enough to keep him from pursuing her. He has virtues that he believes the Pāṇḍavas lack, and so he will not be swayed by words alone (MBh 3.252.10-12). Draupadī then speaks about the virtues of her husbands who cannot be defeated in battle as they are fearsome warriors, and states she will not be afraid of him, no matter how badly he molests her, as long as she is under the protection of her five heroic husbands (MBh 3.252.13-21). Then, Jayadratha and Koṭikāśya grab her,

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[14] *saroṣarāgopahatena valgunā sarāganetreṇa natonnatabhruvā| mukhena visphūrya suvīrarāṣṭrapaṃ tato 'bravīttaṃ drupadātmajā punaḥ||*

With wide open eyes she watched them now
Attempting to seize her, upbraiding them;
And in fear, she cried out, 'Don't touch, don't touch me!'
And she screamed for the help of Dhaumya the priest.

Jayadratha held her by her skirt,
But with all her strength she pushed him away;
And, his body repulsed by her, that miscreant
Fell down like a tree whose roots have been cut (MBh 3.252.22-23).

As Draupadī responds to this king she is actively defending herself. She stands up for herself in the face of adversity as the powerful king is trying to kidnap her. She screams and fights off his attempts to seize her and is even powerful enough to push the king to the ground, as an axe fells a tree. While the connection to fire is not explicit, her assertive response to the king is more consistent with the active nature of fire than a passive response would be. Even as she stands up for her own freedom, as she does in the assembly hall, here she also extols the grandeur of her husbands as a good wife should (*The Law Code of Manu* 5.154).

The final episode to be examined is one where Draupadī must once again fight off the unwanted advances of a lustful man. Again we see the destructive function of fire associated with Draupadī. This time her anger is directed at Kīcaka, a general in the army of the kingdom in which the Pāṇḍavas are hiding during the final year of their thirteen-year exile. At this point, Draupadī and her husbands have all taken on various roles within the kingdom to hide their identities. Draupadī has become a hairdresser to queen Sudeṣṇā, and Kīcaka sees her, is smitten by her beauty, and asks her to be his wife (MBh 4.13.1-12).

This, Draupadī's first encounter with Kīcaka, is similar to her encounter with the lustful king in the forest. She once again tries to intimidate using the power of her husbands. She repeatedly tells him that she cannot be had, she is a married woman, and that desiring her is the same as desiring death since her husbands will kill him (MBh 4.13.18-21). However, at the beginning of the passage we see Draupadī try a different tactic; she appeals to the caste divide. He is of a higher caste than she, a lowly maidservant to the queen (MBh 4.13.13). Even this, an allusion to caste difference, really is about dharma, so she immediately reasons with him on dharmic grounds of caste and the forbidden nature of a married woman. She says,

> I am the wife of another, good fortune to you! And your proposals are beneath you. Wives are dear creatures – think of the Law [dharma]! You should never set your mind in any way on the wife of another. For it is the life rule of good men to avoid the forbidden. Indeed, a man of evil soul, who in his folly covets wrongly, finds despicable disgrace and gets into very great danger (MBh 4.13.14- 16).

Only when both these tactics fail does Draupadī refer to the violence that her husbands are capable of, as she does in the forest encounter with king Koṭikāśya. Despite her clever speech, Kīcaka is not swayed and he goes to queen Sudeṣṇā and has her send Draupadī to Kīcaka under the ruse of getting liquor from him (MBh 4.14.1-10). Draupadī refuses the demands of the queen, saying that Kīcaka will attempt to seduce her (MBh 4.14.11-12). She asks that another serving lady be sent in her place so she can avoid the insults of Kīcaka (MBh 4.14.11-15). Draupadī's willful, fiery personality is evident in the argument with the queen. However, the queen insists, saying that Kīcaka would not harm her since the queen has sent her and so Draupadī sets out for Kīcaka's dwelling

(MBh 4.14.16-20). Kīcaka welcomes her to his dwelling, and she is not there but a moment before he makes advances towards her and touches her hand. Draupadī throws him to the floor and flees to the hall where her husbands sit with the king of Virāṭa. Kīcaka follows, grabs her, throws her to the ground, and, before the eyes of her husbands and other kings, he kicks her (MBh 4.15.1-14).

The text again uses the vocabulary of fire to describe Draupadī's response. Though she is weeping and must ignore her husbands or risk exposing their true identities, when she addresses the Matsya king her dreadful (*raudra*) eyes are not merely flashing or glowing, they are "blazing" (*dahyamānā*):

> Weeping, the full-hipped woman clung to the hall door and, ignoring her dejected husbands, Draupada's daughter [spoke] to the Matsya king, guarding her disguise and Law conforming pledge, while blazing [*dahyamānā*] with dreadful eyes [*raudrena*]. (MBh 4.15.14)[15]

She gives a passionate speech about how she, the wife of righteous warriors, was kicked by Kīcaka (MBh 4.15.15-18). Draupadī stands before yet another group of men and ridicules her attacker, but also her husbands who do nothing to prevent her from being disrespected by Kīcaka. She once again demonstrates her fiery personality and a somewhat destructive side as she goads her husbands, whom she compares to "castrates," into action. She is angry, humiliated, and ashamed of her husbands. She says,

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[15] *ākāramamiraksantī pratijñaṃ dharmasaṃhitām| dahyamāneva raudreṇa cakśuṣā drupadātmajā||*

> Me, the proud wife of men who could kill off this entire world but are tied in the noose of Law [dharma], me a *sūta*'s[16] son has kicked with his foot! Where on earth are the great warriors roaming in disguise, they who were the refuge of those who sought shelter? How can these powerful, boundlessly august men like castrates suffer that their beloved and faithful wife is kicked by a *sūta*'s son? Where has their intransigence gone, where their virility and splendor, if they choose not to defend their wife who is being kicked by a blackguard? (MBh 4.15.15-22)

However, as we will see in chapter three on Draupadī's marriages, this time her anger and prodding of her husbands works because one of them, Bhīma, deals with Kīcaka in a thoroughly destructive manner.

As we have often seen before, the text presents Draupadī to us with vocabulary that links her with fire. The scenes involving Kīcaka and the scenes following his death are no exception to this. After Kīcaka kicked her, Draupadī is so enraged that she sets her mind to revenge and again the text uses the language and imagery of fire to describe her emotional state: "Having been kicked by that son of a *sūta* the flushed princess Kṛṣṇā burned with rage and planned the death of the marshal [Kīcaka]" (MBh 4.16.1).[17] She is *bhāminī*, translated by Van Buitenen as "flushed" but also meaning an angry or passionate woman (Monier-Williams). Also she "burned" with rage, or blazed, flamed brightly (*samajvalat*) (Monier-Williams). The power of fire is again evoked to describe this strong female character.

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[16] A *sūta* is a person of mixed casted parentage, that of a *kṣatriya* man and a Brahmin woman which implies a caste impurity and a low-born status (*The Law Code of Manu* 10.11;10.17; 10.26). Here Draupadī uses it as an insult directed towards Kīcaka.

[17] *sā hatā sūtaputreṇa rājaputrī samajvalat| vadhaṃ kṛṣṇā parīpsantī senāvāhasya bhāminī| jagāmāvāsamevātha tadā sā drupadātmajā||*

Draupadī devises a plan, along with her husband Bhīma, to kill Kīcaka. Draupadī sets up a time to meet with Kīcaka for what he thinks will be an intimate tryst. Kīcaka agrees to the arrangement, his lust for her consuming his mind: "Mightily awash with joy, Kīcaka went home – the fool did not realize that death [*mṛtyum*] had come in the form of a chambermaid [*sairandhrī*]" (MBh 4.21.19).[18] Here we see that Draupadī is considered to be a harbinger of death, a wolf in the clothing of a sheep. Although she is not the active agent in his death, which comes in the mighty arms of Bhīma (who takes her place at the rendezvous), she is the cause it of because she is the one who incites Bhīma's rage, as I discuss in detail in chapter three.

Draupadī and Bhīma successfully execute their plan; Kīcaka is not only killed, but is reduced to "one mangled ball of flesh" (MBh 4.2160). Draupadī is granted revenge to calm her wrath: "she rejoiced and felt no longer vexed" (MBh 4.21.63).

Even though Bhīma is the one who actually kills Kīcaka, his kinsmen identify Draupadī as the cause of his destruction. The text underscores Draupadī's connection to fire by presenting fire as the means for her death as desired by Kīcaka's kin. Kīcaka's kin plan his funerary rites and set about to let him have his pleasure in death by burning Draupadī with him. They go to king Virāṭa and say, "Kīcaka has been killed [*hataḥ*] for [the sake of] this woman [*asyāḥ kṛte*]. Let her burn [*dahyeta*] with him now" (MBh 4.22.7).[19] King Virāṭa agrees to allow Draupadī to be burned with Kīcaka: "Knowing that

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[18] *kīcako 'tha gṛhaṃ gatva bhṛśaṃ harṣapariplutaḥ| sairandhrīrupiṇam mūḍo mṛtyuṃ taṃ nāvabuddhavan||*

[19] *tato virāṭamūcuste kīcako 'syāḥ kṛte hataḥ| sahādyānena dahyeta tadanujñātumarhasi||*

the *sūtas* had the upper hand, the king approved [*rājānvamodata*] that the chambermaid [*sairandhryāḥ*] be burned [*dāhaṃ*] with the *sūta's* son [*sūtaputreṇa*]" (MBh 4.22.8).[20]

Not only does Draupadī cause Kīcaka's death, but also the deaths of one hundred and five of his kinsmen, who are slain by Bhīma to prevent them from killing Draupadī in fire. Having been granted permission by the king to burn Draupadī, Kīcaka's kinsmen bind Draupadī and forcibly carry her to the place where bodies are cremated. "They lifted up [*samāropya*] the slim-waisted woman, tied [*nibadhya*] her, and all carried her to the burning field [*śmasānam*]" (MBh 4.22.10).[21] However, Bhīma arrives to rescue Draupadī, carrying a huge tree, which successfully frightens away the family of Kīcaka. Bhīma then kills one hundred and five of Kīcaka's kinsmen because they have molested and insulted the innocent Draupadī.

The king is told of the deaths of Kīcaka's kinsmen and is asked by the people of his kingdom to set in motion a plan to protect the kingdom from the agent of this destruction. "Lay down at once a policy by which this city of yours does not meet its destruction [*vināśam*] in the guise [*veṣeṇa*] of a chambermaid [*sariandhri*], king!" (MBh 4.23.5).[22] Though Draupadī is a mere chambermaid, the citizens perceive how destructive she is. The powerful and destructive characteristics of fire are linked with Draupadī not only in her words and actions, but also in the words and actions of other characters who witness her powerful impact.

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[20] *parākramaṃ tu sūtānāṃ matvā rājānvamodata| sairandhryāḥ sūtaputreṇa saha dāhaṃ viśāṃ pate||*

[21] *tatastu tāṃ samāropya nibadhya ca sumadhyamām| jagmurudyamya te sarve śmasānamabhitastadā||*

[22] *yathā sairandhriveṣeṇa na te rājannidaṃ puram| vināśameti vai kśipraṃ tathā nītirvidhīyatām||*

Draupadī, as demonstrated by the key scenes discussed here, is a willful and strong heroine. She has so many misfortunes happen to her that it hardly seems fair that she is often the one to rescue herself from these situations. However, since she does get herself out of these sticky situations, either by her own virtues, or by goading her husbands into action on her behalf, she functions as a powerful character vital to the epic plot. The fiery way in which Draupadī enters the story continues to inform how she behaves for the duration of the epic plotline. This elemental association gives her the characteristics of fire, power, destruction, and beauty and these characteristics are with her throughout the epic. She is a remarkable character who is quick-tempered and quick-witted. She often seems to be the backbone of her husbands, as we will see in chapter three.

Draupadī's fiery nature not only influences the scenes where she is present, like the ones discussed above and the scenes in which she interacts with her husbands, but also scenes where she is not present, like the war itself and the great destruction that war entails. After the attempted disrobing of Draupadī in the assembly hall and the second gambling match, the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī leave for the forest. As Draupadī leaves the kingdom she vows that the wives of the men who caused her such grief will themselves experience grief over the death of their husbands, sons, kinsmen, and friends when the exile is over (MBh 2.719-20). She predicts the mass destruction to follow because the epic itself ends with almost total destruction and slaughter of many people. The dead far outnumber the living and the war does leave many women grieving for loved ones, including Draupadī herself who has lost all of her sons.

Draupadī is one of the causes of the war and, consistent with her fiery nature and the destructive power of fire, the epic ends with total destruction.

2.3 Textual Associations with Fire: Purification

As we have seen above, fire has many characteristics in the *Sāṃkhya* system of Hindu philosophical thought. These characteristics are upward movement, purification, burning, cooking, lightness, brilliance, destruction, power, and lustre (Chakravarti 1951, 246). The episodes discussed above demonstrate that Draupadī, the central female heroine of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, is not only born from a sacrificial fire altar, she also is attributed many of the characteristics of fire. The classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* presents many instances where the language used for Draupadī and the events around her, as well as the way she behaves, clearly demonstrates this association with fire.

However, Draupadī's connection with fire includes the power of purification. Draupadī is discussed in the classical Sanskrit text as possessing a high level of purity even though her personal circumstances would normally compromise her purity, for example, her marriage to five men simultaneously. In ancient India, polygamy was accepted and practiced, men could have several spouses throughout most of Hindu history, women, however, could not (Doniger 2009, 296). The fact that the *Mahābhārata* goes to great lengths to justify the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī with three separate explanations implies two very important things. First, the notion of a polyandrous marriage was foreign enough to be an uncomfortable if not a taboo subject

for the author(s) of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and its intended audience and so justifications were supplied in order to soften the controversial subject matter (Doniger 2009, 296). Second, the author(s) attributed sexual purity to Draupadī despite her being the shared wife of the five Pāṇḍavas. Thus, she is gifted with yet another characteristic of fire within the text, the power of purification.

Several passages in the *Mahābhārata* appear to justify the unconventional marital situation of Draupadī and the five Pāṇḍavas. The first such instance, in the *Ādiparvan* (The Book of the Beginning), is in a list of partial incarnations of gods and goddesses. It is not a full explanation for the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī, but lays the groundwork for an explanation that will follow. The list includes all of Draupadī's husbands and states that Yudhiṣṭhira was a portion of the god Dharma; Bhīmasena of the god Vayu, (Wind); Arjuna of Indra; and Nakula and Sahadeva were portions of the Aśvins (MBh 1.61.85). Then the text describes Draupadī:

> A part of Śrī was born here on earth for the sake of love as a blameless [*aninditā*] virgin [*kanyā*], from the middle of an altar in the house of Drupada. She was neither too small nor too tall, and fragrant like the blue lotus; her eyes were long and lotuslike, her hips well-shaped, her hair long and black. All the marks of beauty favored her who had the sheen of a beryl stone; and secretly [*rahaḥ*] she stirred the hearts [*cittapramāthinī*] of the five lordly men (MBh 1.61.95-97).

This brief, but telling passage is a discussion of Draupadī's birth and physical appearance and contains the statement that she is a partial incarnation of Śrī, a goddess associated with prosperity, well-being, royal power, and illustriousness (Kinsley 1986, 19). In early Vedic literature Śrī is physically described as being radiant as gold,

illustrious like the moon, shining like the sun, and lustrous like fire (Kinsley 1986, 20). Indian mythology in general, and the *Mahābhārata* in particular, associate sovereignty and prosperity with the goddess Śrī-Lakṣmī (Hiltebeitel 1990, 143). Hiltebeitel presents the loss and return of "Prosperity" (Draupadī) as a general theme in the *Mahābhārata:*

> Draupadī, the queen of kings, is Śrī, 'Prosperity', whose marriage to every king, not to mention the 'five Indras among men', is the sign of a virtuous reign. In symbolic terms, as Draupadī says herself, she is without husbands, for, since they have lost their kingdom, the relationship between them and herself as Śrī, 'royal Prosperity,' has 'dissolved' (1990, 89-90).

Perhaps as an incarnation of Śrī, Draupadī gains the auspicious qualities attributed to Śrī. The shared fiery of nature of Draupadī and Śrī is noteworthy because it helps to identify Draupadī as an incarnation of Śrī. Perhaps it is the purifying quality of the fiery nature of Draupadī that is clearly positive and valued. Destruction in the world of the *Mahābhārata* has its proper place and is necessary. The almost complete destruction that is the result of the war is "good" in that it is part of the never-ending cycle of creation, destruction, and re-creation required to usher in a new age (*yuga)* (Hiltebeitel 1990, 310-311). Despite this, destruction is potentially negative and Hindu tradition tends to view destruction negatively, especially when an unruly or angry female causes it. However, Draupadī is viewed as an incarnation of Śrī, a highly auspicious goddess, and thus has at least one aspect of her character that is positive despite the destruction that surrounds her. We also see that she is born on earth as a "blameless virgin" (*aninditā kanyā*), which is an obvious assertion of her purity especially since an assertion of her sexual purity at birth would not normally be necessary.

The first complete justification for the polyandrous marriage occurs when the as yet unmarried Pāṇḍavas are living in disguise in the kingdom of Drupada, the father of Draupadī. It is significant that this justification comes along with an attempt to emphasize the purity of Draupadī. In Drupada's kingdom, Vyāsa the sage comes to visit the Pāṇḍavas and tells them a story about a young virtuous ascetic girl performing austerities in the wilderness (MBh1.157.6). This young girl had one great sorrow, that she had no husband, and so she began performing mortifications in order to obtain a husband. Eventually she pleased the god Śaṃkara,[23] who appeared to the young maiden and asked her to choose a husband (MBh 1.157. 7-9). She replied that she wanted a husband with all virtues, repeating this sentiment five times (MBh 1.157.10). Śaṃkara said, "You shall have your five husbands, dear girl!" (MBh 1.157.11). The young girl, realizing her error, said that she just wanted one husband who possessed all virtues, but the god said that since she asked five times, she would receive five husbands in her next lifetime (MBh 1.157.12-13). Vyāsa tells the Pāṇḍavas that this maiden was born as the "blameless [*anindita*] Kṛṣṇā Pārṣatī [Draupadī]", and that she is destined to be the wife of all five men because of her actions in a previous life (MBh 1.157.14). Once again her purity is alluded to because she is again referred to as "blameless". In this story her purity is indirectly mentioned in the fact that in a past life she was sufficiently disciplined and adept to be granted a boon from the god Śiva. Further, she secured the boon through *tapas* (mortification), ascetic disciplines that generate an inner heat as suggested by the derivation of the term from a verb that means "to heat" (√*tap*). As the

[23] Śiva

mythology of Śiva shows, this inner heat can manifest as fire (Doniger 2009, 393-395). Even in her past life, Draupadī's connection to fire is suggested.

The second justification for the polyandrous marriage of Draupadī occurs just after Arjuna has won Draupadī in the archery contest and brings her home to meet his mother. The Pāṇḍavas return home and in their excitement call to their mother, "Come see and what we found". She replies, "Now you boys share it amongst yourselves", not realizing that what they found was Draupadī (MBh 1.182.1-2). To prevent their mother from being a liar and to honor and obey her they had to do as she asked. By this explanation we find Draupadī becomes the wife of five men through no act or fault of her own. She does not instigate the situation, but simply obeys the decree of her mother-in-law, as a dharmic daughter-in-law should. Though the purity of Draupadī is not directly stated in this story, her purity is implied because she bears no blame for the polyandrous marriage. This story is yet another justification for the polyandrous marriage, a justification which returns Draupadī to a state of blamelessness in her unique marital situation.

The third and final justification for the polyandrous marriage is given during the wedding ritual itself. Drupada, the father of Draupadī, has some misgivings about the plural marriage as he feels it is a breech of law (dharma) (MBh 1.188.7). The sage Vyāsa Dvaipāyana takes him aside and narrates the story of the five Indras. Vyāsa recounts that the gods and Yama once attended a sacrificial session. While Yama was preoccupied, death among mortals came to a complete stop and so the gods turned to Brahmā, who reassures them (MBh 1.189.1-5). The gods see a golden lotus float down a

river. Indra is sent to investigate and he sees a woman weeping in the stream (MBh 1.189.5-10). The woman leads Indra to a handsome young man playing dice on the Himālaya. Indra identifies himself as the king of the gods, but the young man ignores him. When Indra grows angry, the young man (an unknown god) immobilizes him with a glance and orders that the woman bring Indra closer. Indra collapses at her touch. The unknown god orders Indra to roll away a mountain where Indra sees four other Indras in a mountain cave, previously incarcerated for similar impudence. All five Indras are then sent to earth to be reborn. They ask to be begotten by Dharma, the Wind, Indra, and the Aśvins and their requests are granted (MBh 1.189.10-25).

This is the completion of the incarnation justification told by Vyāsa when he explains that Draupadī was destined to be the wife of the five Pāṇḍavas (MBh 1.157.14-16). Vyāsa explains that the five Indras are the Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī is Lakṣmī (another name of Śrī), and that they were destined for each other. He also enables Drupada to see them in their true forms (MBh 1.189. 35-40). Next Vyāsa recounts the narrative about Śiva granting a hermit girl five husbands, the very same tale that he told the Pāṇḍavas:

> In a wilderness of austerities there once lived a daughter of a great-spirited seer. Beautiful though she was, she found no husband. Now, they say, with awesome austerities she satisfied Śaṃkara, and being pleased the Lord of his own accord said to the maiden, 'Choose a boon!' At his words the maiden said to the Lord of Gods, the boon granting Śaṃkara, 'I wish a husband who has all virtues,' and said it again and again. The benevolent Lord of Gods gave her the boon: 'You shall have five excellent husbands!' said Śaṃkara. She propitiated the God and again said: 'I deserve one husband from you, endowed with virtues!' Thereupon the God of Gods, who was in benign spirits, spoke these hallowed words: 'Five times you have said to me 'Give me a husband,'and so shall it be, my dear – good luck shall befall you – when you have gone to another body, it shall be as you

> have said.' So, Drupada, this daughter was born to you, beautiful as a Goddess. Kṛṣṇā Pārṣatī has been ordained to be the wife of the five and remain blameless. Celestial Śrī, after having done her dread mortifications, arose at the grand sacrifice and became your daughter (MBh 1.189.41-49).

The text explains the polyandrous marriage by having the sage (who tradition identifies as the composer of the epic) explain to the father of Draupadī that his daughter is the incarnation of Śrī and the Pāṇḍavas are reincarnations of the five Indras and thus are destined to be wed. Vyāsa re-tells the story of the ascetic woman in the wilderness who is granted a boon from a god and explains that Drupada's daughter is the reincarnation of this woman, whom Vyāsa identifies with Śrī and explicitly connects with Draupadī's birth from the fire of the sacrificial altar. Further, despite the fact that she is destined by past actions to be wed to five men, she will "remain blameless" (*anindita*). She will remain pure even though she is destined to wed five men.

The purity of Draupadī is again emphasized during the wedding ceremony. After being informed of the divine nature of Draupadī and the Pāṇḍavas, Drupada gives his consent and the marriage preparations are made. The palace is decorated, the proper rituals are conducted and the bride and grooms are adorned with ornaments and fine clothing.

> One after the other, a day apart,
> The warrior sons on the king of men,
> The beautiful scions of Kuru's line,
> Took each the hand of the choicest of brides.
>
> And this great wonder the seer declared,
> A wonder surpassing the power of man,
> That the beautiful bride of majestic might

Each day became a virgin again (MBh 1.190.14-15).

As Dhand reads this passage, Draupadī is miraculously restored to virginity after consummating each of her marriages, thus giving each brother an unsoiled virgin bride (2008, 119). The sexual purity of virginity is of utmost importance because the expectation is that women are to have only one sexual partner in their lifetimes (Dhand 2008, 105). Girls should remain virgins until marriage as is articulated in the ideals of *pativratā* dharma, in which a girl saves herself for the man she eventually marries (Dhand 2008, 113). "*Pativratā*: at its simplest, the word literally means a woman who is sworn (*vratā*) to her husband/lord/master (*pati*)" (Dhand 2008, 160). We are told that Draupadī is restored to a pure state even after being with her husbands. Each day she awakes to become a virgin again so that she cannot be accused of being a loose woman. She was a virgin with each one of her husbands through some means that the text emphasizes is miraculous: it is a great wonder *(mahārha),* one that surpasses the power of man.

Her purity is explicitly stated over and over throughout the epic. We see it stated in the many ways that the text justifies the polyandrous marriage and in the way that Draupadī is said to be "blameless" (*aninditā*). It is no mere coincidence that she is won by Arjuna; she is destined to become part of the Pāṇḍava family through her unique marriage. Not only is she referred to as "blameless" in several of the passages above, we are at one point explicitly told that her virginity is restored to her each day. Her purity is an important enough characteristic of Draupadī that it is mentioned in several different passages, often by the sage that tradition attributes with the

composition of the text. Hence, we see another fiery characteristic of Draupadī – purity – emerge. Draupadī's purity and its connection with fire are made explicit in the mythology and practice of firewalking as will be discussed in chapter four.[24] She is purification embodied in the female form; she is blameless, virtuous, and an incarnation of Śrī, who is herself an embodiment of auspiciousness, and her virginity is restored to her after she consummates each of her five marriages.

2.4 Conclusion

Draupadī's association with fire is clear and complex. From the moment of her very birth from a sacrificial fire altar we see that connection and the connection is evident and strengthened in the passages examined in this chapter. We see how the Sanskrit vocabulary used for Draupadī and those around her serves to strengthen this connection. She is often described as "burning with anger", having a gaze under which one would "burn", and having a beauty so majestic that she is "ablaze like the flame of a fire in the night".

However, it is not these fiery words alone that connect Draupadī with the element from which she was born. Her words and actions fortify this connection. She possesses such passion and rage that it leaps from the pages of the text. Just as Draupadī's witnesses within the epic often share her outrage or feel her power, audiences of the epic would likely also feel her outrage at the injustices done to her. We naturally empathize with the "good guys" of the epic and here the heroes not only feel

[24] See especially pages 100-104.

her outrage but are filled with wrath themselves, thus we follow the lead of the epic heroes and sympathize with the plight of Draupadī. She burns with indignation and very often inspires similar feeling of wrath within her husbands. She often uses powerful words to get her feelings across and does not shy away from conflict. In fact, she instigates conflict herself.

Not only does she possess a raw and emotionally triggered power, but she is also a destructive force. Once again this stems from her birth from fire, where it is decreed that she will be the doom of the warrior clan. This is not hyperbole; she does have a crucial role in the destruction of the warrior clan. There is no coming back when a disembodied voice says that your main function is destruction! From the passage describing her birth alone we see that she was created for the destruction of others. It is in part because of the injustice done to her during the assembly hall scene that the great war of the epic occurs. It seems that she is inadvertently the cause of destruction on a grand scale. However, armed with the knowledge of the decree made at her birth the text presents the reader with the idea that it was supposed to happen this way. She was the unintended result of a ritual and her purpose, as decreed by the disembodied voice at her birth, is to "lead [*ninīṣati*] the baronage to its doom [*ksayaṃ*]" (MBh 1.155 .44). She is not a meek, mild woman who sits idly by awaiting rescue. She has the power and determination to accomplish many feats herself. If she cannot physically be the agent of destruction, she will inspire others to do so with her impassioned speeches and fiery glances.

Draupadī's fiery characteristics are varied. She is the embodiment of power and destruction, two very important characteristics of fire. However, she also embodies the purification characteristic of fire. The text presents us with several justifications for her polyandrous marriage, a situation in which a woman would not be considered pure because she shares her body with not one man but five. Śiva's boon to the young ascetic woman, granting her a virtuous husband five times, thus ordaining her to be the wife of husbands and yet remain blameless, is one such justification for the polyandrous marriage. Repeatedly, Draupadī is said to be "blameless"(*anindita*) and the text goes so far as to explain that her virginity is restored to her after she consummates each of her five marriages. The text demonstrates Draupadī's purity to the audience in this manner and thus gifts her with another characteristic of fire, that of purification.

After examining the evidence presented in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, one can see that Draupadī's association with fire goes beyond the simple fact of her creation from it. The characteristics she shares with fire are presented throughout the text and thus are unlikely to be mere coincidence. We will see in chapter three that her fiery characteristics have far-reaching effects within the relationships that she has with each of her husbands. Draupadī's association with fire is clearly demonstrated within the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and thus has an extensive effect on the epic plot. The characteristics of power, destruction, and purification play a large role in the events that surround Draupadī and within the very personality of the epic heroine. She appears to be a personification of fire and the ramifications of this can be clearly seen throughout the epic storyline.

Chapter 3: The Element of a Good Marriage: The Effect of Draupadī's Fiery Nature on Her Marriages

3.1 Introduction

Marriage is an important aspect of the householder life stage within Hindu culture. The householder stage is the keystone of Hindu life and society and an essential stage of personal spiritual development, especially for high caste men and women, during which Hindu dharma requires that a householder "...foster a family, undertake an occupation appropriate to his caste, and perform rituals, usually Vedic rituals, that help insure the stability of the world" (Kinsley 1993, 7). One could easily say that both of the Sanskrit epics, the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, are householder epics. The main characters of both are in the householder stage of life, are married, and have children at some point during the main story arc of the epics. Both epics are, on one level of meaning, concerned with worldly matters, kingdoms, family, war, and ritual for worldly gain. Of course, various theological and philosophical levels of meaning are also present within each text. However, when examining the level concerned with the householder's perspective, it is instantly apparent how important marriage and marital relationships are within both texts. The main action of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* does not begin until the five epic heroes are married to the beautiful Draupadī. Thus, everything that occurs in the main story and all the events surrounding the epic's heroes and heroine, involve characters that are in the

householder stage of life. As such marriage is of great importance in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata.*

Draupadī's place in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* is one defined by her marital status. Most of the action occurring in the main epic story arc surrounds Draupadī or results from events that are influenced by her. She is a powerful force at the center of the epic; without her it would be a different epic indeed. As Dhand says, "The plot would be much paler without Draupadī's scandalous polyandrous marriage" (2008, 18). This "scandalous" marital arrangement leads to several complications, one of which is the question of Draupadī's purity addressed in chapter two, another is the legality of such a marriage when the epic text itself denounces one woman having several husbands. The text, through a conversation between a brahmin and his wife, states; "It is not against the Law [dharma] for a man to have many wives, good man, but for a woman it is a very grave breach of the Law [dharma] to leap over her first husband" (MBh 1.146.34). Despite this, the main heroine of the epic is married to several men, not through a series of monogamous relationships, but simultaneously. As we have already seen, the epic attempts to explain this irregular marital relationship by providing the audience with three justifications.

Draupadī's relationships with her husbands are very interesting as they provide a drastic contrast to the marital relationship presented between Rāma and Sītā, the ideal couple in much of Hindu thinking, in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa.* Whereas Draupadī takes a more active role in her marriages, using anger and emotions to influence her husbands' actions, Sītā is more passive and subtle. However, both women know dharma

and use it when attempting to influence their husbands. In this chapter, I first introduce the dharma of a wife, specifically *pativratā* dharma, using the *Law Code of Manu* and secondary sources. I then examine interactions between Draupadī and her husbands that demonstrate Draupadī's link to the element fire. Draupadī's association with fire begins from her birth from a sacrificial fire altar and colors her behavior throughout the epic, including her relationships with her husbands. The key scenes involving an interaction between Draupadī and one of her husbands that demonstrate Draupadī's association with fire are: Draupadī encouraging Yudhiṣṭhira to take action against the Kauravas (MBh 3.29.34-33.59); Draupadī persuading Bhīma to kill Kīcaka (MBh 4.46.17.1-21.1); Draupadī advocating war while her husbands argue for peace (MBh 5.54.80.20-41); and Draupadī urging Yudhiṣṭhira to think of the fates of his brothers and herself as she exhorts him to accept kingship (MBh 12.84.14.1-41). The analysis of these scenes demonstrates that Draupadī's fiery personality functions to push her husbands out of passivity and into action, often on her own behalf. As well, her encouragement often contributes to the main actions of the plot.

3.2 The Dharma of a Wife: the *Pativratā* Ideal

To examine Draupadī's marital interactions and her behavior within the marital structure, it is important to be aware of what is expected of her, that is, of her dharma as a wife. Conforming to the dharma of wife is important in Hindu social structure and as such knowing the duty of a wife is key to understanding the character of Draupadī and the role her fiery characteristics play within her marital relationships.

The Law Code of Manu, a Hindu law text that contains rules and regulations that are often echoed in the *Mahābhārata*, says that a wife "...should be always cheerful, clever at housework, careful in keeping the utensils clean, and frugal in her expenditure" (5.150). *The Law Code of Manu* goes on to say that a good woman should serve her husband as if he was a god and never behave in a displeasing manner.

> Though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust, and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god. For women, there is no independent sacrifice, vow, or fast; a woman will be exalted in heaven by the mere fact that she has obediently served her husband. A good woman, desiring to go to the same world as her husband, should never do anything displeasing to the man who took her hand, whether he is alive or dead (*Law Code of Manu* 5.154-156).

A woman who abandons her husband or is unfaithful to him becomes disgraced, reborn in the womb of a jackal, and afflicted with evil diseases (*Law Code of Manu* 5.163-164). In contrast, a woman who does her duty, controlling her mind, body, and speech, and remaining faithful is called a "good woman" and receives "the highest fame in this world and the world of her husband in the next" (*Law Code of Manu* 4.165-166).

Preparation for marriage often begins in childhood, when a girl is to learn the arts of being a good wife from her mother (Kinsley 1993, 135). Kinsley discusses the marital training further by discussing Sītā as the ideal role model for young girls and married women to emulate:

> In this regard, [a woman's] role model is the goddess Sita, the wife of Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*. Sita is the ideal *prati-vrata*, the wife entirely devoted to her husband. For Sita, Rama's welfare, reputation, and well-being are the primary concerns of her life. In her unmarried state, the girl is to cultivate Sita's virtues and pray that she will be

> blessed with a husband as good as Rama. In her married state, which traditionally begins shortly after her first menstruation, she is urged to imitate Sita in all her thoughts and actions and to regard her husband as a god; by serving him she will realize worldly and spiritual fulfillment (1993, 135).

This *pativratā* ideal, exemplified by Sītā, means a woman is sworn (*vratā*) to her husband, lord, or master (*pati*) (Dhand 2008, 160). In the *Mahābhārata*, for a woman to be sworn to her husband implies being dedicated, committed, and staunchly devoted to achieving the interests of her husband (Dhand 2008, 160). Draupadī gives a good description of *pativratā* dharma as she describes herself as a *pativratā* to the wife of Kṛṣṇa, she says:

> I serve the Pāṇḍavas and their wives always religiously without selfishness, likes, and dislikes. In return for their affection I place my soul in theirs, obey them without self-seeking, and guard the hearts of my husband without fear of a wrong word, wrong stand, wrong glance, wrong seat, wrong walk, or misinterpretation of a gesture; that is the way I serve the Pārthas . . . I do not eat or lie down until my husband has eaten or lain down or bathed, ever, even when there are servants. When my husband comes home from the field, the wood, or the village, I get up to meet him and make him feel welcome with a seat and a drink of water . . . I am bent on what is good for my husband (MBh 3.222.18-31).

Draupadī adds that her husband (sic)[25] is godlike and infallible (3.222.35). The ideal of *pativratā* entails a relationship with one's husband that is a version of devotion (*bhakti*). "Being an authentic *pativratā* entails nothing short of the mental and physical worship of one's husband as God"(Dhand 2008, 161). As such, the directives of *pativratā* dharma

[25] Presumably Draupadī means each one of her five husbands.

are simple but formidably inclusive (Dhand 2008, 164). Dhand presents a compelling summary of *pativratā* dharma when she states:

> A women's life should entail nothing less than complete mindful attentiveness to the needs of her lord. All her actions should be directed at service to him, all her thoughts should be for his well-being and welfare; all her social world should be constructed around him – his family, his friends; anything that in any way may distract her from complete devoted attention to him should be ruthlessly cut away – her personal friends, her own personal wishes, her very identity; even her children, if need be (2008, 164-165).

This social construct, of the dharmic wife, is one to be kept in mind as the role of Draupadī and her fiery nature within her marital exchanges is examined. Draupadī is aware of *pativratā* dharma and in fact considers herself a *pativratā* by her own admission. This undoubtedly influences her behavior as she interacts with her husbands. However, it is evident that the fiery side of her nature often comes to the forefront as she interacts with her husbands, even if this is in opposition to the social ideal of *pativratā*.

3.3 The Presence of the Element Fire in Draupadī's Marital Relationships

The first significant interaction between Draupadī and one of her husbands occurs as they begin their thirteen-year exile. The Pāṇḍavas, together with Draupadī, have established a dwelling near Lake Dvaitavana and are sitting together engaging in a sorrowful conversation. Draupadī, demonstrating the powerful and destructive characteristic of fire, passionately speaks to Yudhiṣṭhira about the unfeeling nature of Duryodhana and his group of followers.

> The beloved and lovely, wise and faithful Kṛṣṇā said to the King Dharma,'He surely is not at all unhappy about us, that evil, cruel, and vicious son of Dhṛtarāṣṭra! When you were banished to the woods, with me, clad in deerskins, and with all your brothers, he did not say anything, did he, and the ill-witted, evil-natured man had no regrets, after dispatching us to the woods, did he? He must have a heart of iron, that man of evil deeds, the rough things he said to you who are the best of us, so prone to the Law [dharma]! That crook with his gang has brought all this suffering on a man like you, used to your comforts and unworthy of hardships, and he rejoices, the fiend. There were four crooks there who did not shed a tear, when you were ousted to the woods, Bhārata, in your deerskin shirts! I counted Duryodhana, Karṇa, the evil Śakuni, and that rotten brother, dreadful Duḥśāsana! All the other kings, greatest of the Kurus, were overwhelmed with grief and the water fell from their eyes!' (MBh 3.28.2-9)

Her frustration at the situation into which they all have been placed is evident. Draupadī uses powerful words, never shying away from calling out her enemies as she sees them. She uses words like evil, cruel, vicious, fiend, crooks, and several other severe terms to describe those who have wronged them. It appears that she has no reservations at speaking to her husband freely and with ferocity. She continues her speech by discussing the life that they once had, full of luxury and joy, in contrast to the one that they now possess, a life filled with hardships and discomfort (MBh 3.28.10-19). It is clear that she is attempting to get a reaction from her husband by playing on his emotions, first speaking so vehemently about the Kauravas, second by reminding him of what they have lost and how far down they have fallen.

Next, Draupadī attempts to provoke anger in Yudhiṣṭhira by emphasizing how miserable are each of his heroic and most honorable brothers.[26] For each one, she asks him why he is not moved to anger to see them enduring such misfortunes and hardships. She extols the virtues of each of her husbands in turn and wonders why Yudhiṣṭhira's anger does not grow (MBh 3.28.20-30). Finally she uses her own misery to try to provoke his anger;

> You have seen me gone to the forest, me who was born in the lineage of Drupada, daughter-in-law of the great spirited Pāṇḍu, so why didn't your anger soar? Surely there is no anger left in you, you the best of the Bharatas, if you can look at your brothers and at me, and your heart feels no qualms! (MBh 3.28.31 -32)

We see Draupadī ask him again and again why he was not moved to anger to see them enduring such misfortunes and hardships. She extols the virtues of each of her husbands in turn and pleads with Yudhiṣṭhira to feel something for their sakes, if not for her own. Each of them suffers in the forest and this deserves a reaction, some sense of anger and retribution. However, she finds Yudhiṣṭhira to be passive and emotionless despite her best efforts to provoke anger within him. She continues to urge him into action, first by telling a parable about a man who questions his father about forgiveness and revenge (MBh 3.29.1-32). She then says;

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[26] For example, she says; "Bhīmasena I see, unhappy as he lives in the forest, sunk in thought – doesn't your anger grow when the time is ripe? Seeing Bhīmasena unhappy, him who used to accomplish his feats of his own accord, why doesn't your anger grow?"(MBh 3.28.20-21). Then she discusses Arjuna, saying; "Seeing the Pārtha gone to the woods, so used to comfort, so unused to hardship, your anger does not grow stronger, and it perplexes me Bhārata! On his single chariot he defeated Gods and men; now you see him banished to the forest – why doesn't your anger flare up [*kasmānmanyurna vardhate*]?" (MBh2.28.25-26).

> Therefore I think, king of men, that it has become time to use your authority on the greedy Dhārtarāṣṭras who are always offensive. There is no more time to ply the Kurus with forgiveness; and when the time for authority has come, authority must be employed. The meek are despised, but people shrink from the severe: he is a king who knows both, when their time has come. (MBh 3.29.33-35)

Draupadī is correctly making a case for action. She is imploring her husband to perform the dharma of a king, which requires violent action against his rivals; a king must never back away from battle (*The Law Code of Manu* 7.87). Draupadī speaks eloquently, with passion and determination and through her appeal to the dharma of the king lays a very convincing case in front of Yudhiṣṭhira, yet he is still resistant. He counters her argument with a lengthy discussion about the vice and danger of anger. Both well-being and ill fortune are rooted in anger, only one who is in constant control of his anger reaps well being while anger becomes the downfall of one who is unable to control his anger (MBh 3.30.1). Angry men do evil, kill elders, hurt the innocent, and honor the guilty (MBh 3.30.2-29). Yudhiṣṭhira concludes his argument by discussing the importance of forgiveness and patience (MBh 3.30.30-50). Draupadī counters this argument by accusing him of having a "befuddled" mind (MBh 3.31.1). She tells him that he is one who knows the Law and that she doesn't understand how he who is upright, gentle, bountiful, modest, and truthful got caught up in gambling (a recognized royal flaw that Yudhiṣṭhira should have tried to avoid) to the point where he lost his kingdom, riches, weapons, brothers, and wife (MBh 3.31.5-18). She says, "My mind has become utterly bewildered and burns [*paridūyate*] with grief as I see this sorrow of yours and this great distress" (MBh 3.31.19). No matter how hard she tries, Yudhiṣṭhira holds

firm to his passivity, even after Bhīma joins in, arguing in favor of action as well. Yudhiṣṭhira decides that they must wait, go through their exile and take action when the time is right, after they have kept their word to the Kurus.

We see in this section of text that Draupadī's fiery personality comes through in her relationship with Yudhiṣṭhira. She is unafraid to say exactly what is on her mind, even if it is in direct conflict with the opinion of her husband. She is passionate in her words and attempts to share that passion with her husbands, although in this instance with Yudhiṣṭhira she is unsuccessful. She attempts to create anger within Yudhiṣṭhira by playing on his feelings for his brothers and his wife. It appears as though Draupadī wants Yudhiṣṭhira to desire revenge as much as she does; she wants him to leap into action and rescue them from the hardships of the forest. She does not mince words, she constantly asks him where his anger is, and, as demonstrated by the examples discussed in chapter two, makes the connection between anger and fire. Draupadī tells him parables about revenge, and explains to him that the time for forgiveness is past. She speaks up for action, even if this action will lead to destruction, perhaps because destruction is her goal.

The second scene in which we see Draupadī's fiery nature in her marital relationships is the death of Kīcaka scene. This scene takes place after the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī have completed the twelve-year forest exile and are completing their thirteenth year living in a foreign kingdom incognito. Kīcaka, as seen in chapter two, desires Draupadī, who rebuffs his advances. Kīcaka, angered by her rebuke, kicks Draupadī before the very eyes of her husbands (MBh 4.15.1-14). This causes Draupadī

much distress and anger and so she turns to one of her husbands and together they create a plan for revenge.

> Having been kicked by that son of a *sūta* the flushed [or the angry, passionate woman - *bhāminī*] princess Kṛṣṇā burned [*samajvalat*] with rage and planned the death [*vadha*] of the marshal.[27] Drupada's daughter, slim-waisted Kṛṣṇā, went to her room, where she washed up thoroughly. After she had washed her body and her clothes with water, she pondered tearfully on how to resolve her grievance: 'What shall I do? Where should I go? How do I succeed?' And while she was thinking, she thought of Bhīma, 'No one but Bhīma will now carry out what I want in my heart.'(MBh 4.16.1-4)[28]

Clearly Draupadī feels Kīcaka must die. After considering her options, she identifies Bhīma as her instrument of destruction. Here we see her fiery characteristic of destruction again; she burns with rage and desires his death and nothing but his complete destruction will satiate her anger. She rises in the middle of the night and goes to Bhīma, awakens him from his slumber and says "Get up, get up! How can you lie as if dead, Bhīmasena? For that evil-doer who molested the wife of one not dead shall not live! How can you enjoy sleeping as long as that most evil marshal, my enemy, lives after perpetrating his crime?" (MBh 4.16.5-10) Bhīma asks for the cause of her grief and assures her that he will always rescue her (MBh 4.16.11-16). Draupadī tells Bhīma her woes over being dragged into the assembly hall, her grief about being molested a second time (the first at the hands of the king of Sindh when they were living in the forest) and her outrage at having been violated again under the very eyes of

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[27] *sā hatā sūtaputrena rājaputrī samajvalat| vadham kṛṣṇā parīpsantī senāvahasya bhāminī| jagāmāvāsamevātha tadā sā drupadāmajā||*

[28] This passage is discussed in chapter two (see pp 41-45).

Yudhiṣṭhira, who she asserts is at the heart of all her sorrows (MBh 4.17.1-9). She plays on the emotions of Bhīma all throughout her speech by using phrases like "what woman like me would care to live after that?" She describes at length how far Yudhiṣṭhira and her other husbands have fallen. Once they were great men, now they are servants. Such is her unbearable state that she cannot possibly survive in this "ocean of grief" (MBh 4.17.10-18.35). She continues her lament over her own misery – whether he wants to hear it or not – playing on Bhīma's emotions the entire time:

> Ask me, wretched woman that I am, what my real purpose is in telling you this. Or don't ask, I'll tell you anyway! I, the queen of the sons of Pāṇḍu and the daughter of Drupada, have come to this pass what woman but me would care to go on living? The sorrow that has set upon me, Bhārata, enemy-tamer, disgraces all the Kurus, Pañcālas and Pāṇḍaveyas. What woman, slayer of enemy heroes, could bear to be so miserable after having been elevated by her many brothers, fathers-in-law, and sons? Surely I must have offended the Placer as a child, and his disfavor, bull of the Bharatas, has brought me misfortune. Pāṇḍava, look at my pallor, such as never visited me before in the worst misery, Bhīma Pārtha, you know how happy I have been; now I have been reduced to servitude, and helpless I find no peace [*āpannā na śāntim*] (MBh 4.19.9-15).

Draupadī emphasizes her sorrow and the fact that she has been reduced to servitude, while praising Bhīma as the slayer of enemies thereby reminding him he is perfectly capable of avenging her. She hammers the point home by showing him her hands; once soft and supple from a life of luxury, now rough and calloused from a life of servitude (MBh 4.19.19-23), and these hands reduce the powerful Bhīma to tears:

> Flushed, Kṛṣṇā wept softly while she enumerated her grievances to Bhīmasena, watching his face. Sighing again and again she said in a tear-choked voice, grating Bhīmasena's heart, 'My offense to the Gods

> cannot have been trifling, if I go on living in my misfortune while I should die.' Then the Wolf-Belly, slayer of enemy heroes, put the swollen and callused hands of the shivering woman on his face and sobbed (MBh 4.19.27-30).

Her words reach into the very heart of the bear-like Bhīma. He sobs alongside his wife after hearing how miserable she has been. She has successfully convinced him of her despair and thus ensures the death of Kīcaka. Bhīma tells his weeping wife that his failure to kill those who wronged her is like a thorn in his heart, but with the same breath he urges her to be mindful of the Law (dharma) and to abandon her wrath (MBh 4.20.1-5). Draupadī repeats her accounts of Kīcaka's relentless advances toward her, noting his unlawful behavior and hinting at the social collapse that such adharmic behavior will cause (MBh 4.20.14-23). Draupadī's argument changes in response to Bhīma's warning to uphold dharma. *She was* upholding dharma. It was Bhīma who was breaking it by ignoring Kīcaka's unlawful behavior. The dharmic character of her call for the destruction of Kīcaka is emphasized as she describes her dharmic attempts to stop Kīcaka's *adharmic* behavior.

> [T]he villain [Kīcaka] laughed out loud; he has not stayed on the path of the strict nor cultivated the Law [dharma]. His soul is evil, his nature is evil, he is under the sway of lust and passion. That boorish and corrupt man may have been rejected repeatedly, but at every encounter he strikes, so that I am ready to give up my life. While you all strive for Law [dharma], a great Law [dharma] is perishing: while you keep up the covenant, your wife will be no more. But when you guard your wife, offspring is protected, and when offspring is safe, the self is safe. I have heard the brahmins propound the four classes and life stages and never is there a Law for the baron but the extirpation of his foes.
>
> While the King Dharma looked on, and in your full sight too, mighty Bhīmasena, a Kīcaka kicked me! . . . Kill this villain too, who

> despises me. Because he is the king's favorite he pesters me, Bhārata! Break the love-crazed chur as a pot on a stone, for he is the cause of my many woes. Bhārata, if tomorrow the sun rises on him alive, I'll mix poison and drink it, lest I fall victim to Kīcaka! It is better for me to die, right in front of you, Bhīmasena! (MBh 4.20.24-35)

Interestingly, Draupadī's speech is similar to the one given by Arjuna on the battlefield before the war begins. He looks around at the warriors that he is about to destroy, his beloved family, friends, and teacher. He imagines the destructive effects of the war on soldiers, their wives, children, and society as a whole and claims that it would be better for him to die than contribute to such chaos (*Bhagavad Gita* 1.28-47). Similarly, Draupadī claims that it would be better for her to die than for her to fall victim to the perpetrators of *adharma*. In terms of Draupadī's connection to fire, we see in her response to Kīcaka her determination to maintain dharma even as she displays fire's power of destruction.

Draupadī is presenting her case for the death of Kīcaka, saying that he is evil and controlled by his lust. She appeals to Bhīma's protective side, appealing to dharma to convince him to kill her enemy. She uses the threat of suicide, tears, and her feminine wiles to exert control over her husband, a very powerful combination indeed because Bhīma agrees to kill Kīcaka and his kin (MBh 4.21.1-2).

The next day Draupadī sets up a secret tryst with Kīcaka, setting their plan in motion (MBh 4.21.11-34). Once Bhīma and Kīcaka meet at the assigned spot under the cover of darkness, Kīcaka attempts to seduce Bhīma, thinking that he is Draupadī, with disastrous consequences. Playing the lover, Bhīma takes the general in his arms, but then Bhīma kills Kīcaka (MBh 4. 21.38-60). Draupadī's powerful speech, detailing her

misery and indignation, inspired such a fierce anger within her husband that he completely destroyed her enemy. Of course, this would not be possible but for Bhīma's temperamental nature. His temper, stroked by Draupadī's fiery personality, explodes into a fierce and uncontrollable wrath that leaves nothing of Kīcaka, but a ball of mangled flesh.

The next scene that depicts Draupadī's fiery characteristic of destruction takes place after the completion of the thirteen-year exile. The Pāṇḍavas and Kṛṣṇa are discussing the next course of action. Yudhiṣṭhira and even temperamental Bhīma are petitioning for peace and compromise. The Pāṇḍavas propose to settle for only five villages of their original kingdom, but Draupadī is vehemently opposed (MBh 5.80.1-10). She says to Kṛṣṇa:

> When neither conciliation nor generosity amounts to anything with those people, I should show them no mercy, Madhusūdana! Enemies that are not appeased by conciliation or generosity should be made to feel the rod, Kṛṣṇa, if we want to save our lives. Therefore hurl a big rod at them at once, Acyuta, you, the Pāṇḍavas and the Sṛñjayas, strong-armed lord! (MBh 5.80.12-14)

Draupadī speaks up for war. She does not want her husbands to compromise; she seeks retribution for everything that they have had to endure over the thirteen-year exile and for her own mistreatment in the assembly hall. Peace is not an option. She continues to plead her case by retelling the story of her molestation in the assembly hall, including how she saved her husbands, who looked on passively as she was assaulted (MBh 5.80.20-28). She continues and explicitly refers to her rage over the abuse she suffered as a fire she has carried now all the thirteen years of their exile:

> If Bhīma and Arjuna pitifully hanker after peace, my ancient father will fight, and his warrior sons, Kṛṣṇa! My five valiant sons will, led by Abhimanyu, fight with the Kurus Madhusūdana! What peace will my heart know unless I see Duḥśāsana's swarthy arm cut off and covered with dust! Thirteen years have gone by while I waited, hiding my rage [*manyuṃ*] in my heart like a blazing [*pradiptamīva*] fire [*pāvakam*] (MBh 5.80.37-40).

Draupadī speaks eloquently and with much conviction. If her husbands "pitifully hanker for peace" then she has others who will fight for her. Her desire for revenge is so great that she cannot find peace until Duḥśāsana, who violated her by dragging her into the assembly hall by her hair, is dead.

Kṛṣṇa's reaction to her powerful speech is not surprising considering the ability that Draupadī has to influence the men in her life. Kṛṣṇa's reaction is as strong as Draupadī's conviction; it is just what she wants to hear. He vows to her that he will destroy her enemies if they do not heed his words and accept the compromise being offered. Kṛṣṇa's speech, especially his reference to the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra (the Dhārtarāṣṭras) being "cooked in the fire of Time", is later reflected in the *Bhagavad Gita* when, just before the battle commences, he reveals his awesome but terrifyingly violent cosmic form and tells Arjuna that he is all-powerful Time who has come for the explicit purpose of destroying the Kauravas (*Bhagavad Gita* 11.32).

> Long-eyed Kṛṣṇā spoke with her throat choked by tears, and she shivered and wept aloud, sobbing, with tears sprinkling her breasts. And the woman of the broad hips shed tears from her eyes like liquefied fire [*dravībhūtamivātyuṣnam*]. Strong-armed Keśava said to her soothingly, 'Soon, Kṛṣṇā, you shall see the women of the Bhāratas weep! They shall, timid woman, weep for their kinsmen and relatives who are killed. They at whom you are enraged, radiant woman, have

> already lost their friends and troops. I along with Bhīma, Arjuna, and the twins will act as Yudhiṣṭhira orders and as ordained fate allows. If the Dhārtarāṣṭras, cooked in the fire of Time, do not listen to my words, they shall lie killed on the earth as fodder for dogs and jackals. Mount Himālaya may walk, Earth split into a hundred pieces, Heaven fall with its stars, before my words are false! I promise you this truth, Kṛṣṇā: stop your tears, for soon you shall see your husbands rejoined with their fortune and their enemies slain.' (MBh 5.80.42-51)

Draupadī holds the fiery characteristic of power within her relationships, even if it is not always her husbands who come to her rescue. She desires destruction and must use someone as her instrument. Here she pleads to Kṛṣṇa, even though all her husbands are present. She is aware of the position of her husbands and so turns to another trusted male for protection. This may be a way of indirectly manipulating her husbands: that she, deeming her husbands to be ineffectual, turns to another male for assistance in their presence might be another way to provoke her husbands to act. Draupadī's desire for destruction fits in with Kṛṣṇa's own divine plan as the result of the war, the destruction of the Kauravas, is a foregone conclusion. Kṛṣṇa will say to Arjuna "I am all-powerful Time which destroys all things, and I have come here to slay these men. Even if thou dost not fight, all the warriors facing thee shall die" (*Bhagavad Gita* 11.32). The result of the battle has been predetermined – the Kauravas are to die. Thus, Draupadī's desire for destruction is a representation of Kṛṣṇa's purpose.

The final scene where Draupadī's fiery nature influences her marital relationship is the scene in which Draupadī urges Yudhiṣṭhira take up the kingship after the devastation of the war is over. Yudhiṣṭhira rants about the results of the war, condemns the *kṣatriya* ethos and the Pāṇḍavas' participation in it, and praises the

virtues cultivated by forest-dwellers (MBh 12.7.1-10). He says that he is renouncing the kingdom and going to the forest. He tells Arjuna to rule the kingdom (MBh 12.7.30-40). Each of his brothers try to dissuade him from this course of action. First Arjuna vigorously assails Yudhiṣṭhira's renunciation of the hard-won kingdom (MBh 12.8.1-5). Next, Bhīma criticizes Yudhiṣṭhira for his feeble-minded misunderstanding. He argues that the violence of the Law (dharma) of *kṣatriyas* is a necessary part of life, and he derides Yudhiṣṭhira for not finishing what he started (MBh 12.10.1-15). Nakula and Sahadeva appeal to Yudhiṣṭhira, arguing that householding and ritual actions are renunciation in its truest forms and that a king who does not make use of his kingdom is sterile (MBh 12.1-13.10).

When the words of the four honorable Pāṇḍavas fall upon the deaf ears of Yudhiṣṭhira, Draupadī, described as "this woman who knew Law [dharma] and saw Law [dharma]" (MBh 12.14.4), greets her husband in a charming manner and uses the suffering of his brothers in an effort to convince him that claiming the kingdom as his own and ruling is the correct course of action. She continues by relating to Yudhiṣṭhira all of the things that he told his brothers during their forest exile: the joys that they would experience one they stifled their enemies and returned to the kingdom (MBh 12.14.9-10). Having said these things to his brothers, she wonders how he can now so disappoint them: "How can you, heroic man, squash their spirits again now?"(MBh 12.14.11-12). She continues;

> A eunuch cannot enjoy the earth. A eunuch cannot gain riches. There are no sons in a eunuch's house, as there are no fish in mud. A kṣatriya without the rod of rule does not shine, one without the rod of rule

> does not gain prosperity; the subjects of a king without the rod of punishment do not thrive happily, Bhārata (MBh 12.14.13-14).

Draupadī seems to be playing on the ego of Yudhiṣṭhira, comparing a *kṣatriya* without the "rod of rule" to a eunuch. The phallic symbolism is clear. She says that both a eunuch and an ineffectual king cannot gain prosperity. This seems to be an example of the classic Indian clash of worldly versus renunciant values: the whole point of dharma and the community life it regulates is prosperity in the form of sons in the household, harmony and riches in the kingdom, and glory among *kṣatriyas.* Draupadī is aware of the function of dharma in community life and appears to be calling Yudhiṣṭhira a eunuch because he refuses to contribute to society by doing his proper dharma. Indeed Draupadī seems to be fearless about the possible insult implied in comparing Yudhiṣṭhira to a eunuch. She is fearless because it is part of her strategy to get not just what she wants, but also, to get Yudhiṣṭhira to do what she believes is dharma. She turns to a discussion of Yudhiṣṭhira's dharma as a king and the fact that his dharma requires something other than renunciation. She says,

> Most excellent of kings, friendliness towards all creatures, generous giving, study, asceticism – all this may be the Law [dharma] for a brahmin, but is not for a king. Restraining the wicked and protecting the pious, and not fleeing in war – this is the highest Law [dharma] of Kings. The man who has both patience and anger, both fear and fearlessness, who both gives and takes, who both withholds and confers benefits, that man is regarded as one who knows Law [dharma] (MBh 12.14.15-17).

Draupadī tells Yudhiṣṭhira that the proper dharma of a king is not to emulate the way of the renunciant, but to do the duty of the *kṣatriya* caste and rule in a manner

that is proper. A proper ruler should possess both ends of the gamut of emotion, fear, and generosity. She continues her discussion by saying that Yudhiṣṭhira has acquired the earth by defeating his enemies, not through holy learning or any other means, and so he should enjoy this earth (MBh 12.14.18-20). She then returns to beseeching him on behalf of his brothers and their happiness:

> Look at your brothers, Bhārata, and make them as happy as mighty bull elephants in rut. Like to Gods, they all withstood their enemies in battle and burned [*tapāḥ*] them. Just one of these men would be enough for my happiness – I believe that. But how much better it is that I have all you tigers of men, you bulls of men, for my husbands . . . (MBh 12.14.27-29).

Draupadī extols the virtues of her husbands in battle, vanquishers of their enemies who not just defeated the enemy in battle, but "burned" them. So, she pleads with Yudhiṣṭhira to think of the happiness of his four valiant brothers before making the rash decision to abandon all that they have fought so hard and lost so much for. The determination of Draupadī is abundantly clear in this scene. She next attempts a new tactic, involving the word of her mother-in-law, a meaningful thing to invoke, as it is vitally important to maintain the honesty of one's elders, especially one's parents. She also questions the sanity of Yudhiṣṭhira and the effect that his apparent insanity may be having on his most honorable brothers. She says:

> My mother-in-law who knows all and sees all lied to me. 'Yudhiṣṭhira will bring you to the highest happiness, O princess of Pāñcāla, after he who is so quickly aggressive kills many thousands of kings.' I see that that was wrong because your mind is muddled, O lord of people. When the eldest in a group is insane all the others follow after him; so all the Pāṇḍavas are insane, O Indra among kings, because you are insane. If

> they were not insane, O lord of people, your brothers would imprison you along with the unbelieving Naysayers and govern the earth. Anyone who does anything as foolish as this does not come to much good. Anyone who behaves so eccentrically should be cured with medicines: By breathing fumes, by the use of ointments, by applications in the nose (MBh 12.14.30-34).

Once again we see Draupadī's power in the way she speaks: this time not in favor of destruction, but in favor of Yudhiṣṭhira doing his kingly duty and ruling the kingdom. Her aggression, often seen as a dharmic flaw within the ideal wife (*The Law Code of Manu* 5.165-166), is in this case righteous or dharmic. She is begging Yudhiṣṭhira to do what is right, to do what duty requires of him and not back away from ruling what is rightfully his. Here, her role is rather like Kṛṣṇa's in the *Bhagavad Gita* for both of them represent the position that violence is part of life and that even such apocalyptic destruction is not bad because it is part of the process of purification and rebirth. Both Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa argue for dharma, regardless of the violent action required, under different circumstances. Draupadī tells Yudhiṣṭhira that "Restraining the wicked and protecting the pious, and not fleeing in war – this is the highest Law [dharma] of Kings" (MBh 12.14.16). Kṛṣṇa uses dharma as an argument when he attempts to convince Arjuna, who was losing heart, to fight in the war. Kṛṣṇa says "Action is greater than inaction: perform therefore thy task in life [dharma]. Even the life of the body could not be if there were no action" (*Bhagavad Gita* 3.8). Again we see the argument between the "pacifists" and those who accept violence, Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa represent those who accept that violence is inevitable and necessary.

Draupadī finally beseeches Yudhiṣṭhira on her own behalf, saying; "O best of the Bhāratas, I am the lowest of all women in the world! After being abused like that by our enemies, I want to live now!" (MBh 12.14.35). Draupadī continues to focus on dharma, it is necessary for Yudhiṣṭhira to rule the kingdom to fulfill his dharma and bring justice and prosperity to the kingdom. Again, Draupadī seems to be arguing for worldly versus renunciant values: the whole point of dharma and the community life it regulates in this case is prosperity in the form of harmony and riches in the kingdom. This cannot be achieved through renunciation; they must continue to live in this world and perform the dharma of householders and warriors.

Yudhiṣṭhira is about to take what has been a successful, albeit devastating, war and turn it into a complete disaster by walking away from the kingdom that they have fought so hard and suffered so long for. This is not acceptable to Draupadī, she knows that Yudhiṣṭhira's dharma is to rule the kingdom and she is so close to returning to a life of peace and luxury. Yudhiṣṭhira now possesses guilt and wants to assuage this by renouncing everything and taking up a mendicant lifestyle. This is not acceptable to Draupadī, she urges her husband to

> Rule the Goddess Earth with her continents, forests, and mountains, and protect creatures Lawfully. Do not lose heart, king. Pouring offerings into the fires, sacrifice with different sacrificial rites. Present the brahmins with towns, feasts, and clothes, O best of kings (MBh 12.14.38-41).

Draupadī's fiery nature is evident as she confronts Yudhiṣṭhira about his plans and vehemently argues with him, attempting to convince him of the error in his thinking.

She speaks with passion, outrage, and the conviction of a dharmic woman. Draupadī's righteous anger, her fiery, passionate nature is acting for the greater good in this scene. She is not only thinking of herself (although I am sure it is one of her concerns), but she is thinking of the well being of each one of her husbands. She is considering the futility of the epic battle if Yudhiṣṭhira was to simply walk away from his duties as king and householder and live as an ascetic in the forest. Therefore, Yudhiṣṭhira refusing to rule the kingdom belittles the losses that they have all suffered, and most of all it goes against the dharma of a ruler.

3.4 Conclusion

Marital relationships are important within the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. As such, Draupadī's relationship with her husbands, particularly Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma, are important to the development of the plot. Some of the key events in the plot occur as a result of the interaction between Draupadī and these two men. It is during these interactions that Draupadī's fiery characteristics are made apparent. Her powerful speeches encouraging action, sometimes-violent action, demonstrates her fiery nature. Draupadī possesses the fiery characteristics of power and destruction and when she engages her husbands in conversation she is not afraid to use these characteristics to push them in the required direction. She turns to her husbands for protection and justice and when they fail to produce the results that she wishes, she turns to another trusted male, Kṛṣṇa, to protect her and get the revenge that she seeks.

Draupadī's discussions with Yudhiṣṭhira are not the typical conversations between a man and wife. First, she implores her husband to exert his authority against the Kurus. She attempts to stir up melancholy and anger in Yudhiṣṭhira. She speaks quite eloquently and with passion and determination, and lays a very convincing case in front of Yudhiṣṭhira, yet she is unsuccessful in convincing him to act. Second, Draupadī urges Yudhiṣṭhira to think of the fate of his brothers and her and exhorts him to take up the kingship after the devastation of the war is over. She appeals to his kingly dharma and often uses barbed words and veiled insults to convince him that taking up kingship is something that he must do. During both of these scenes we see Draupadī's fiery nature present itself in the way in which she speaks to Yudhiṣṭhira.

Draupadī's fiery nature is also present in her interaction with Bhīma. She plays on her husband's emotions, using the threat of suicide, tears, and her feminine wiles to exert control over him. Draupadī's powerful speech, detailing her misery and indignation, inspired such a fierce anger within her husband that he completely destroyed her enemy. Her personality, characterized by fiery anger, power, and destruction, here helps her achieve her goal. She convinces her husband to defend dharma and commit murder.

When Draupadī's husbands fail her by refusing to go to war, she turns to Kṛṣṇa to exact revenge. She does this in front of all five of her husbands, deeming them ineffectual by turning to another for protection. When discussing the reaction of Draupadī in response to her husbands' inability to protect her, Dhand states:

> In addition to providing for their wives and families, men are expected to be able to defend them physically. Draupadī's most bitter complaint against her husbands is that they did not protect her from the assaults of the [Kauravas].[29] For this, she remonstrates with them in bitter language. 'Is it not the eternal way of *dharma*, forever observed by the righteous, that husbands, even those who are weak, protect their wives?' she demands of Kṛṣṇa, and gives mighty vent to her anger (III.13.60). Nobody reprimands her for these vituperations, because it is universally recognized in the text that Draupadī has been wronged (2008,110).

Draupadī is righteous in her expectations of protection and revenge and since her husbands are unable or unwilling to do this she turns elsewhere. She succeeds in obtaining Kṛṣṇa's promise of revenge with a sharp tongue, heart-felt speech, and fiery tears (*dravībhūtamivātyuṣnam*).

Draupadī's association with fire is clear and is clear throughout the epic's portrayal of her, her marriages, her role as epic heroine. From the moment of her birth from a sacrificial fire altar, the connection strengthens as the plot unfolds and it shapes her interactions with her husbands. Sanskrit vocabulary strengthens this connection. Draupadī tells Yudhiṣṭhira "My mind has become utterly bewildered and burns [*paridūyate*] with grief... "(MBh 3.31.19); and we are told that "...the flushed [or the angry, passionate woman - *bhāminī*] princess Kṛṣṇā burned [*samajvalat*] with rage and planned the death [*vadha*] of the marshall [Kicaka]" (MBh 4.16.1). These are merely a few vocabulary choices that connect Draupadī with the element from which she was born. Her words and actions further fortify this connection. She is a powerful character who desires and achieves destruction on a grand scale. She burns with rage and

[29] There appears to be an error in Arti Dhand's text, it reads Pāṇḍavas where it should say Kauravas.

attempts to provoke similar feelings of wrath within her husbands. She turns to them for help and since she cannot physically be the agent of destruction, she inspires them to do so with her impassionate speeches and fiery glances.

The destruction that Draupadī seeks is dharmic in nature. She often uses dharma to support the arguments she makes with her husbands. Draupadī knows dharma and refers to it when convincing Yudhiṣṭhira to rule the kingdom and when convincing Bhīma to protect her. The destruction she seeks is an extension of dharma: taking up arms and fighting for their kingdom and protecting their wife is the performance of the dharma of a warrior, king and husband. The result of performing dharma may be destruction in this case, but here Draupadī represents the values of Indian householder society in opposition to the values of renunciant, pacifist beliefs. In doing this, advocating violence for the protection of dharma, she is behaving exactly as Kṛṣṇa explains he behaves in the face of adharma. Her ethics are not merely the ethics of a housewife; they parallel the cosmic justice of the supreme deity. In a classic statement of *avatara* theology, Kṛṣṇa explains that, as the supreme deity, he watches over the universe and he takes an *avatara* (descends and becomes involved in the world) to oppose *adharma* when it becomes too strong and restore dharma:

> When righteousness is weak and faints and unrighteousness exults in pride, then my spirit arises on earth. For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction of evil in men, for the fulfillment of the kingdom of righteousness, I come to this world in the ages that pass (*Bhagavad Gita* 4.7-8).

Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa both act on behalf of dharma. As such the violence that occurs as a result is viewed as positive and necessary. Draupadī's fiery characteristics of destruction and purification culminate in a purifying violence that seems to be part of the divine cosmic plan of Kṛṣṇa, the destruction of the Kauravas and the end of the *yuga*.

Chapter 4: Draupadī's Link to Fire in Living Traditions

4.1 Introduction

Draupadī's fiery association is clearly evident in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. This association begins from her birth from a sacrificial fire altar and continues throughout the epic's portrayal of her, her marriages, and her role as epic heroine. From the moment of her birth from a sacrificial fire altar, the connection is evident and strengthens due to key scenes that present Draupadī using fiery language and through the words and actions of the epic heroine herself. She possesses such intense emotion that it leaps from the pages of the text. She burns with indignation and very often inspires similar feelings of fury within her husbands as well as others in the epic who witness her anger. Not only does she possess a raw and emotionally triggered power, but she is also a destructive force.

Draupadī's fiery characteristics are varied. She is the embodiment of power and destruction, two very important characteristics of fire. However, she also possesses fire's characteristic of purification, a characteristic that is more specific to Hindu contexts than destructive power, for example. The text presents us with several justifications for her polyandrous marriage, a situation in which a woman would not be considered pure because she shares her body with more than one man. Draupadī is said over and over again to be "blameless" (*aninditā*) and the text goes so far as to explain to the audience that her virginity is restored to her after she consummates each of her

five marriages. The text demonstrates Draupadī's purity to the audience in this manner and thus gifts her with another characteristic of fire, that of purification.

We see this connection with fire grow throughout Draupadī's interactions with her husbands; she is able to achieve her goals by using her power and desire for destruction to push Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, and Kṛṣṇa (though he is not her husband, she indirectly manipulates her husbands through a conversation with him) in the direction that she desires. All this is evident when examining the text of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. However, the connection between Draupadī and fire is made in the traditions that develop around the Sanskrit text itself. There have been a number of studies of the larger epic traditions and the way Draupadī is worshipped and understood within them. In this chapter the two studies that I draw upon document vibrant living traditions that include the act of firewalking. I draw upon these living traditions in an effort to demonstrate that the understanding of the elemental associations of Draupadī extends beyond and is indeed further developed outside the classical Sanskrit text. Alf Hiltebeitel's two-volume (1988 & 1991) work on Draupadī and Alleyn Diesel's article (2002), are the two studies, demonstrating the lived traditions surrounding Draupadī, from which I draw my information. It is apparent that Draupadī's connection with fire is strengthened in many alternative versions of the *Mahābhārata* and in ritual practice. Thus, it is not just an insignificant or random coincidence that the connection is made in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. Furthermore, the presence of the connection between fire and Draupadī in living Hindu practice shows that Hindus recognize its existence and indeed its importance.

Whatever the intensions of the original *Mahābhārata* composers were, later Hindu tradition builds upon the associations between fire and Draupadī that are in the Sanskrit epic.

The evidence from the lived traditions strongly points to an association between Draupadī and fire that goes beyond the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, extending into lived traditions in South India and in the diaspora to Africa. These lived traditions place Draupadī in an exalted position; she is more to her devotees than just the heroine of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. These traditions also place greater emphasis on Draupadī's role within the epic story, strengthening her association with fire as they accord significance to her birth and her involvement with fire through the culmination of the Draupadī festival in firewalking rituals.

4.2 Draupadī's Link to Fire in Hiltebeitel's *The Cult of Draupadī*

Alf Hiltebeitel is a scholar who has worked on several aspects of the *Mahābhārata* and traditions surrounding the *Mahābhārata*, including his two-volume work *The Cult of Draupadī* (1988 & 1991), which "is an account of the relation between the South Indian, Tamil 'folk' traditions of the Draupadī cult and the pan-Indian classical structure of the Sanskrit epic" (Hiltebeitel 1988, xvii). The first volume of Hiltebeitel's work focuses on the mythology of the Draupadī cult; while the second volume details the ritual aspects of the cult, including an in-depth look at the ritual cycle of the cult which culminates in the firewalking ceremony (Hiltebeitel 1988, 436). The Draupadī cult studied by Hiltebeitel exists in locations in Andhra Pradesh and from there all the way down the

east coast and throughout Tamilnadu (Hiltebeitel 1988, 24). However, the extent of the Draupadī cult could be much wider than this, but these areas are where Hiltebeitel's research has taken place.

Hiltebeitel demonstrates findings that strengthen the argument presented in this thesis. He presents several scenes from variations of the *Mahābhārata* that link Draupadī with fire as well as songs sung by devotees that outright call Draupadī "the fire . . . which cannot be touched" (Hiltebeitel 1988, 9). Draupadī is also presented, in Hiltebeitel's data, as being associated with the characteristics of fire evident in the text of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, including power, violence or destruction, and purity. When analyzing the themes present in a song of praise sung by the dramatists who perform at Draupadī festivals, Hiltebeitel says,

> More subtly intertwined with the traditional story are the transformations of the character and the role of Draupadī herself. I have already mentioned some of those that concern the 'forest Draupadī' in particular ones that involve power and violence. Indeed, she goes into the forest as Viraśakti, the 'Heroic Śakti' (see verse 4), a form that, as we shall see, is unknown even to her husbands.[30] More than this, her fierce form is portrayed as an extension of her forest chastity, a combination of themes that goes far beyond her portrayal in classical epic traditions. The *Mahābhārata* does, to be sure, convey the impression that Draupadī abstains from sexual relations with her husbands during the period of forest exile (Hiltebeitel 1981, 187-90, 204-5). But beyond that interval, she is a normal wife and mother. In the Draupadī cult, however, she is a virgin (1988, 8).

[30] Verse four is as follows: "For the Pāṇḍavas who went to the forest, my mother, you went as Viraśakti (the goddess as 'Heroic Power') to be their escort (i.e., to help them)" (Hiltebeitel 1988, 4).

Hiltebeitel shows that this folk tradition presents Draupadī with the characteristics that fire also possesses: the characteristics of power and violence/destruction as seen in her "forest Draupadī" form, and chastity/purity in her virginal state, which continues, according to this folk tradition, even after she has become the wife of the Pāṇḍavas. These traits are also evident in the character of Draupadī as she is presented in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, as seen in chapters two and three of this thesis.

This connection between Draupadī and fire is further intensified in devotional songs, sung by devotees. These songs refer to Draupadī as mother and as a form of the goddess, but they most persistently refer to her connection with fire, beginning with the classical theme of Draupadī's birth from the sacrificial fire (Hiltebeitel 1988, 9-11). The Tindivanam *pūcāri's* (priest's) song contains this reference in its final verse:

> Affectionate Pāñcāli, you are the precious woman born in the sacrificial fire (*aṉpāṉa pāñcāli ekkiyaṉ taṉṉilē arumai peṇpiṟantavaḷum nī*);
> Sister of the primal Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu), O Draupadī, rare parrot (*aruṅkiḷi*) Pāñcāli. (Hiltebeitel 1988, 11)

Intensifying her fiery connection are two *pūcāri* songs, published in small printed handbooks that are available to priests for their temple services (Hiltebeitel 1988, 5). These songs invoke Draupadī's "untouchability", which suggests "not only purity but potentially destructive violence – in connection with her identity as the goddess (or mother) of fire" (Hiltebeitel 1988, 11). The first such song, called the *Nārāyaṇacāmi Mutaliyāa* (abbreviated by Hiltebeitel as NM) is often sung by dramatists during the "street dramas" that are performed at Draupadī festivals (Hiltebeitel 1988, 4) and

includes the following verses emphasizing Draupadī's link with fire and her "untouchable" nature:

> Not touchable (*aṇṭāta*), my mother, you are the fire, mother (or Fire mother, Fire-goddess; *neruppēyammā*)
> Who cannot be controlled by anyone else, my mother Draupadī.
> You are the great fire (*perumneruppē*), my mother, not touchable (*tīṇṭāta*).
> You are the lady who burned the Triple City, my mother,
> You are the only one among the three eyes (of Śiva), O mother.
> O Draupadī, my mother, you are the three flames (of sacrifice; or of the sun, moon, and fire). (NM, 16,11. 11-15 in Hiltebeitel 1998, 11).

Here, she is referred to as an uncontrollable fire, a great untouchable fire, and the three flames. This song explicitly strengthens her connection with fire, while this association with fire "deepens her affinities with Śiva, the usual destroyer of the Triple City (Tripura), god of the three eyes, and of the 'great fire' of the dissolution of the universe" (Hiltebeitel 1988,11).

Draupadī's association with fire is also predominant in the other printed song, called the *Cattivēl Ceṭṭyār* (abbreviated by Hiltebeitel as CC). This song repeatedly mentions her creation from fire, and refers to her as fire and "not touchable."

> You are the Primal Śakti, Mother Draupadī,
> Who came and rose from fire, O mother.
> Mother Śakti, Mother Draupadī,
> O mother, you who rose, rushing forth
> From the sacrificial fire of Pāñcālaṉ (Draupadī's father).
> Not touchable, mother, your are the fire, mother (again, *neruppēyammā*),
> O mother, lady who is there in the universe great and small *aṇṭapiṇṭam tāyē ānavaḷē*),
> If one sees you in the daytime, you are Pārvatī.

> In the nighttime, you have become the stars (? *nī nātakṣatayāḷ*, probably from Sanskrit *nakṣatram*). (CC, 31, 11. 8-16 in Hiltebeitel 1988, 11-12)

Draupadī's association with fire is intensified through both of these printed songs. Her fiery characteristics of violence/destruction and chastity/purity are evident within these Draupadī cult songs, through her uncontrollable burning of the Triple City and untouchable nature. It is no accident that the *pūcāri* songs highlight Draupadī's associations with fire since it is usually the *pūcāris* who play the most prominent ritual roles in the firewalking ceremonies that conclude Draupadī festivals (Hiltebeitel 1988, 12). These ceremonies, the climax of Draupadī festivals, will be discussed in more detail in sections 4.2.2 and 4.2.3.[31]

4.2.1 The *Mahābhārata* of the Draupadī Cult

Within the Draupadī cult, the *Mahābhārata* has been subject to an intense and thorough folk reinterpretation (Hiltebeitel 1988, 132). In fact, the South Indian Draupadī cult *Mahābhārata* is an "adroit and compelling multileveled interpretation of a living *Mahābhārata*" (Hiltebeitel 1988, 135). Hiltebeitel notes, however, that there are actually several folk *Mahābhāratas* within this tradition:

> It must be admitted, however, that the notion of a Draupadī cult *Mahābhārata* is a heuristic construct. No such monolithic entity really exists. At one and the same festival, there will usually be three performative modes through which the *Mahābhārata* is presented: Piracaṅkam or Pārata Piracaṅkam, 'recitation' of the epic in Tamil by a pāratiyār (or *pārata-piracaṅki*, that is, 'a *Mahābhārata* reciter'); Terukkūttu, or 'street drama'; and a local ritual enactment (1988, 135).

[31] See pp. 100-108.

During the recitation of the *Mahābhārata,* the text usually recited is the *Villiputtūrār Iyaṟṟiya Makāpāratam* (Villi), a text that possibly dates from the late 14th century (Hiltebeitel 1988, 15), but sometimes the *Nalāppiḷḷai Mahābhārata* is recited as well (Hiltebeitel 1988, 137). However, the corpus of text found within the Draupadī cult extends to many other versions and even collections of plays (Hiltebeitel 1988, 160-161). It is clear, from the evidence presented by Hiltebeitel, that Draupadī's fiery associations are present within these versions of the epic story as well as in the classical Sanskrit text.

Hiltebeitel's work centers around thirty-two plays that he witnessed actually performed at Draupadī festivals (1988, 164). Often these plays are inspired by the Tamil *Mahābhāratas,* such as the *Villiputtūrār Iyaṟṟiya Makāpāratam* (Hiltebeitel 1988, 194, 196, 199). These plays develop Draupadī's association with fire beyond what is found in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata.* As noted by Hiltebeitel, these plays often accentuate Draupadī's fiery association. For example, the *Turōṇāccāri Yākacālai* play

> . . . accentuates the fire-birth of Draupadī at the expense of that of her brother. In the Sanskrit epic, it is Dhṛṣṭadyumna who is a 'portion of Agni' (*Mbh.* 1.61.87, 15.39.14; see Hiltebeitel 1976a, 317-19), born directly from the sacrificial fire, while Draupadī is born from the center of the earthen altar, or *vedi* (1.155.41). Here again the drama draws from Villiputtūr, who has Draupadī born from a *peruntī,* a 'great fire' (1.3.90; cf. 1.5.6, 25). One thus finds an important aspect of Dhṛṣṭadyumna's symbolism yielded to his sister. This impoverishment of Dhṛṣṭadyumna's epic link with fire to the enrichment of other figures is something that will bear further notice. It marks a significant tendency in the Draupadī cult to reallocate the epic's symbolism of fire (1988, 194-195).

This "reallocation of the epic's symbolism of fire" by the Draupadī cult often reflects upon the character of Draupadī. Within the Draupadī cult, she becomes closely linked to fire in texts, performances, and practices.

Another play that accentuates Draupadī's association with fire is the *Arccuṉaṉ Vil Vaḷaippu*. The main action of this play loosely follows an outline that is familiar from both Sanskrit and Tamil sources (Hiltebeitel 1988, 195). This is another drama that draws, somewhat inconsistently, from the *Villipāratam* (Hiltebeitel 1988, 195). This play first presents Draupadī as distressed at the idea of the Pāṇḍavas being burned in the Lacquer House (Hiltebeitel 1988, 197). This dramatic scene has her making a vow unprecedented in the Sanskrit text, "recalling her birth from fire and announcing that if Arjuna does not come and bend the bow, Draupadī says, 'easing my mind, I will lose my life, falling and increasing the great bright fire' (*mikka cen taṇalai mūṭṭi viḻnt' uyir iḻappēn*; *Arccuṉaṉ Vil Vaḷaippu* , 15-16)" (Hiltebeitel 1988, 198). This vow was surely inspired by the *Villipāratam*, which has Draupadī speak very similar words to her serving maids:

> When I was born from the fire, the man with the chest crowned with ornaments (Arjuna) was designated by my father with affection to appear in this golden hall on this day. If he does not marry me before this fire here (*īṇṭ' eri muṉṉar*), putting the kings to shame, then I will enter fire again (*mīṇṭ' eri pukavaṉ*) (Villi 1.5.25 in Hiltebeitel 1988, 198).

The association between Draupadī and fire does not end here. Within the *Villipāratam* text, Draupadī and her effect on the people surrounding her are described with various fiery terms. A few verses after the one quoted above, when Draupadī enters the

svayaṃvara (self-choice) hall, her effect on the kings is "like putting fuel into the fire of desire" (*kāmat tīyil intaṉam iṭuvat' ēyppa*) so that they "all melted like fire-treated ghee" (*aḻal paṭṭa ney pōl aṉaivarum urukiṉār*) (Hiltebeitel 1988, 198). As Hiltebeitel observes, "Villi (1.5.96) has Draupadī 'bathe' or 'enter into' (*mūḻku*) this marriage fire, the very 'fire of her birth' (*iṉṟa...aḻalil*), after each of her five marriages to vouchsafe her chastity" (1988, 198). It is clear that the image and the physical element of fire are important within the *Villipāratam*, as is the use of fire to demonstrate the chastity of Draupadī. This chastity is extremely important because Draupadī remains a virgin on earth according to the Draupadī cult (Hiltebeitel 1988, 208).

Another drama based upon the *Mahābhārata* that emphasizes Draupadī's link with fire is the *Cūtu-Tukilurital*, the most forceful of the influential *Mahābhārata* plays by Irāmaccantira Kavirāyar of Irāyanallūr. It combines the narrative, dramatic, and ritual elements that account for the transformation of Draupadī from one of a number of happy Pāṇḍava brides into a violated and vengeful South Indian festival goddess (Hiltebeitel 1988, 228). In the *Villipāratam*, at the culmination of the disrobing scene when Draupadī stands vindicated, Bhīṣma and the other kings present, praise Draupadī as "the goddess of chastity" (2.2.250) (Hiltebeitel 1988, 264). At this point in the *Cūtu-Tukilurital*, the Kuru elders rise and speak thus:

> To the five she is the goddess (or wife), to others she is the mother
> (*ivaḷē aivarukku tēvi ivaḷē maṟṟ' evarkku'mātā).*
> She is the goddess Earth (*pūmitēvi*), she is Fire's self-manifestation
> (*akkiṉicorūpi*).
> She is a speaker of truth, she is a woman of virtuous qualities.
> She is the goddess of this lineage (*ivaḷē ikkulalatteyvam*). Is there any
> other like her? (*Cūtu-Tukilurital*, 86 in Hiltebeitel 1988, 264).

The text attributes Draupadī with links to two elements, earth and fire. She "is the goddess Earth" and she "is Fire's self-manifestation." This presents a strong link with fire; she is not simply born from fire, she is so closely linked with fire that she is a manifestation of it. She is the universal mother identified with both elements, a mark of her important status.

An early 20th century text titled the *Tiraupatātēvi Māṉmiyam* (by Ilaṭaimaṇappiḷḷai and composed in 1902) contains five sections, the first gives information about the Pāṇḍavas' birthdays; the second, which is discussed in further detail below, is a text extolling the glory of Draupadī; the third is instructional regarding the installation of icons; the fourth is a recitation of Draupadī's one hundred and eight names; and the fifth is a song of praise for her (Hiltebeitel 1991, 483 n.1). The second section of the *Tiraupatātēvi Māṉmiyam*, the *Śrī Tiraupatātēvi Maṉmiyam*, or "The Glorification of Draupadī," contains evidence of Draupadī's association with fire in the language used by the character herself and in the purpose of her birth, which is the destruction of the demon Acilōmaṉ who ruled his kingdom with a "crooked scepter" (Hiltebeitel 1991, 481).

"The Glorification of Draupadī" begins by discussing how Acilōmaṉ achieved boons from Brahmā by performing severe penance for ten years (Hiltebeitel 1991, 483-484). These boons granted him protection from all except women, as he thought them of "little strength" (Hiltebeitel 1991, 484).[32] The text then does something unique in that it combines the various narrative justifications of Draupadī's polyandry into a single

[32] This is the first of several parallels between this text and the *Devī Māhātmya*, as I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter (see pp. 98).

sequential narrative beginning with Draupadī asking Śiva to give her five husbands and ending with the five Indras in the cave being born as the five Pāṇḍavas (Hiltebeitel 1991, 484-485). The text then condenses the main battles in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* into one sentence and resumes immediately its glorification of Draupadī with the gods agreeing that Draupadī, the great goddess, should kill Acilōmaṉ (Hiltebeitel 1991, 485). The gods then summon Draupadī using a sacrificial fire and she appears to them from the middle of the fire pit (Hiltebeitel 1991, 486). The text then describes her physical appearance as follows;

> She had shoulders like a lion's, hair that made you wonder whether it was black thread, and a body the color of the dark *neytal* flower (*karuneytal*), good fragrance, the look of a fourteen-year-old, shinning like lightning, bearing in her right hand a flower bud with a female green parrot on top, her left hand hanging (Hiltebeitel 1991, 486).

Draupadī then, appearing on her golden chariot in the middle of the sacrificial fire altar, says;

> 'Come close and listen with affection. I am Kiriyācatti who appeared from Kāriyacatti[33]. My body has the true form of Fire (*akkiṉicōrūpam*). Between me and Agni there is no difference (*akkiṉikkum eṉakkum pētamēyillai*). In a former age, for the sake of the five Pāṇḍavas, for the sake of Pāñcālarājan, in order to rid the earth of its burden, you made me descend in the sacrifice. For what reason have you invited me to come now?'[34] (Hiltebeitel 1991, 486).

[33] "The "power of action" that derives from "causal power"." (Hiltebeitel 1991, 486 n. 15).

[34] The speaker here does not identify herself as Draupadī by name, however her identity is clarified throughout the remainder of the text.

Draupadī's association with fire is clear in this passage. Draupadī's own words proclaim that her true form is that of fire and that there is no difference between Agni, the god of fire, and herself. The proclamation, combined with her appearance within the sacrificial fire altar, is the first clear link in this text between Draupadī and fire.

Draupadī is then informed of the situation with Acilōmaṉ and she is beseeched by the gods to destroy this demon who has captured the three worlds and she agrees (Hiltebeitel 1991, 487). She accomplishes this feat through her anger and cunning;

> Getting very angry, thinking that Acilōmaṉ should be destroyed, preparing to use the Nārāyaṇa weapon (*astiram*), Draupadī pulled the bow all the way back to her ear, so that the entire world trembled. Then, even though she cut off and flung away ninety-nine of his heads, a holy voice spoke from the sky, saying: 'Because he has received a boon from Brahmā, if his hundredth head alone falls to the ground, it will explode (*veṭi*). You should fight without letting it fall to the ground.' (Hiltebeitel 1991, 487)

The text perhaps hints at the link between Draupadī's anger and the destructive power of fire, since she is specifically said to be "very angry" as she battles the demon and her first pull of the bow causes the entire world to tremble.

The text then intensifies the link between Draupadī and fire by having her providing instruction on how she is to be worshipped and that there will be a fire festival each year:

> Every year, the eighteenth day should be the first day of the month of Cittirai.[35] On that day you should do a big fire festival (*akkiṉi*

[35] The significance of the "eighteenth day" is not explicitly stated, however the firewalking ceremony itself occurs after the performance of a drama titled "Eighteenth-Day War", which suggests that the performance of the firewalk occurrs on the day that

> *makōtcavam*). On that day I will appear in a karakam and I will walk across the fire with the devotees . . . If you perform the festival in this manner, besides the miraculous great pleasure (*pēriṉpam*) that is mokṣa, I will give to my devotees everything else according to their desire, without a doubt (Hiltebeitel 1991, 489).

With these words, Draupadī creates a ritual for her devotees that provides the greatest link between Draupadī and fire: a physical connection that is relived yearly by her followers as they perform the fire-walking ceremony that, according to this text, was created by Draupadī herself and she will come and participate herself. This ritual will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. However, this text that has Draupadī proclaim that her true form is fire, appears to be an influential mythological basis for this lived tradition.

"The Glorification of Draupadī" and the Draupadī cult itself share common themes with the *Devī-Māhātmya*, an important *Śākta* text composed approximately fifteen hundred years ago in northwest India (Coburn 1991, 1; see also Hiltebeitel 1988, 390-391). *Devī-Māhātmya* is translated as "The Specific Greatness (or Virtue) of (the) Goddess" by Thomas Coburn, but is frequently rendered as "The Glorification of the Goddess" and, like the Tamil *Śrī Tiraupatātēvi Maṉmiyam* "The Glorification of Draupadī," has a goddess as its supreme divine being (Coburn 1991, 1). According to Coburn

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symbolically represents the end of the great war (Hiltebeitel 1991, 441). Since Draupadī's own firewalk after the end of the war is sometimes understood to be the means for purifying her husbands from sins committed on the battlefield (see pp.101), the ritual re-enactment might perform this interpretation on each anniversary of the end of the war. Cittirai is the month of the Hindu calendar that encompasses April to May.

elements shared between the *Devī-Māhātmya* and the Draupadī cult studied by Hiltebeitel include the following:

> some cult stories refer to a demon assuming various animal and human guises, as Mahiṣa [the demon defeated by the goddess in the *Devī-Māhātmya*] does; . . . the laughter of Draupadī as she taunts Duryodhana is reminiscent of the Goddess's laughter at Mahiṣa prior to their battle; the theme of the Goddess's adversary wanting to marry her is variously attested in both the Draupadī cult and the *Devī-Māhātmya*; . . . as the folk tradition tells of Draupadī dwelling in forest exile, she "is herself a multiform of Kālī, the disheveled goddess linked with inauspiciousness and death"; . . . and, finally, the birth from fire of Draupadī herself, as of her antagonist's weapons, is evocative of the Goddess's birth from the combined [fiery] *tejas* of the gods . . . (1991, 91).

It is evident that the Draupadī cult considers Draupadī of equivalent importance as the goddess of the *Devī-Māhātmya* is to her devotees. The parallels between Draupadī and the goddess of the *Devī-Māhātmya* suggest that the practitioners within the Draupadī cult consider her to be the supreme divine being, or at least one comparable to the goddess of the *Devī-Māhātmya*. It may well be that the cult of Draupadī connects Draupadī with the goddess of the *Devī-Māhātmya* in an effort to link their local goddess with the pan-Indian goddess of the Sanskritic tradition. Certainly, the mirrored theme of fiery births demonstrates that both Draupadī and the goddess of the *Devī-Māhātmya* have a link with fire: both come from fire in order to protect the gods and the world through destruction of demons. It is striking that the cult of Draupadī links Draupadī with the goddess of the *Devī-Māhātmya* through the element of fire. The link between Draupadī and the goddess of the *Devī-Māhātmya* goes farther than this in that both

Draupadī and the goddess of the *Devī-Māhātmya* are worshipped for protection, healing, success and other worldly concerns (*Devī-Māhātmya* 4.2-36, translated in Coburn 1991).

4.2.2 The Firewalk Mythology

The Draupadī cult's vision of the *Mahābhārata* introduces the notion that Draupadī walked on fire, a notion alluded to in the various myths and dramas already discussed (Hiltebeitel 1988, 436). The culmination of the Draupadī festival is the firewalking ritual. This ritual is grounded in various mythological narratives that provide reasoning for the firewalk itself and strengthens the link between Draupadī and the element of her birth. It must be stated first, however, that the most popular explanation of Draupadī's role in relation to firewalking is that Draupadī makes the coals cool for her firewalking devotees (Hiltebeitel 1988, 437). This notion is tied in more with firewalking rituals than with any epic-related myths. It is said, for example, that Draupadī makes the coals fresh and cool like flowers or she drapes her hair or her saris over the coals to make the ritual more tolerable for her devotees (Hiltebeitel 1988, 437).

Nevertheless, there are three epic contexts in which the firewalk is said to have occurred that also provide religious precedent for the firewalking ritual. The first is Draupadī's marriage, the second is after she had been touched by Kīcaka as a means of proving her purity, and the third is a post-war context in which she undergoes the firewalk in order to demonstrate her purity as a result of a trick masterminded by Kṛṣṇa, or she accompanies her husbands across a fire-pit to rid them of sins committed during the war (Hiltebeitel 1988, 438-443).

The first context is the marriage of Draupadī. Once again the text of the Draupadī cult provides a strong link between Draupadī and the purifying characteristic of fire. Here the *Villipāratam* provides the oldest connection of this kind:

> After thus performing the marriage (with Dharma), she entered/bathed in turn in the very hot loving fire which gave birth to her, and emerged again, with full black hair, a chaste lady like the north star (that is, like Arundhatī); in this way the other four (Pāṇḍavas) married her (1.5.96) (Hiltebeitel 1988, 438).

It is clear that Draupadī enters into fire after each of her marriages in order to retain her chastity in her polyandrous marriage. When discussing this *Villipāratam* passage and its place within the Draupadī cult, Hiltebeitel states that:

> Commentators agree that Villi is depicting a repeated 'entry into fire' (*akkiṉipiravēcam*). Since he probably knew the Draupadī cult in its early development, it is conceivable that his verse reflects a popular tradition of his time, or even an attempt to give the firewalking a locus classicus in the epic. In any case, the notion that Draupadī entered fire to confirm her chastity after each of her marriages still has some currency in the Draupadī cult. Moreover, for her to reappear chaste each time from the fire of her birth is a theme that brings Villi's passage close to the Draupadī cult's theology of virginity (1988, 438).

Again we see the link between Draupadī and the purifying aspect of fire in the second epic context for the firewalk, according to which Draupadī performed her firewalk to confirm her purity after Kīcaka touched her (Hiltebeitel 1988, 439). Again, the firewalking confirms Draupadī's sexual purity. This setting is a reflection of the "fire ordeal" that restores Sītā to Rāma in the other prolific Indian epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Hiltebeitel 1988, 439). In order to demonstrate her purity after being held captive by

the demon king Rāvaṇa, Sītā must perform a trial by fire, which she completes successfully and emerges from the flames unscathed. Similarly, Draupadī undergoes a trial by fire, to demonstrate her purity after being touched by a man who is not her husband. Again, the link between Draupadī and the purifying characteristic of fire is clearly demonstrated.

The third epic context for the firewalk is after the war and there is a proliferation of mythic tales concerned with this (Hiltebeitel 1988, 439). These mythologies make the most sense in connection with the ritual cycle of the Draupadī cult, which has the firewalk follow ceremonies that reenact the war's conclusion (Hiltebeitel 1988, 439). The first of these narratives, yet another confirmation of Draupadī's sexual purity, involves Bhīma risking life and limb to bring Draupadī a flower to console her during their forest exile. Upon receiving the flower, Draupadī proclaims that she will save the flower to adorn her hair after the war is over. However, when the time comes for her to decorate her hair with the flower, she finds that one petal has wilted and so Bhīma tells her she should walk on fire to demonstrate her chastity (Hiltebeitel 1988, 439). The connection between the wilted petal and Draupadī's chastity remains unclear, however the link between Draupadī and the purification of fire is apparent.[36]

Various other accounts attest that Draupadī walked on fire to purify herself of the mistreatment of the Kauravas or to demonstrate her purity after they held her so

[36] A demonstration of the sway that she has over the temperamental Bhīma is also apparent in this narrative, as it is he that risks "life and limb" to procure the flower in order to cheer up Draupadī.

long "in captivity", thus explaining Draupadī's firewalk as a rite of postwar purification (Hiltebeitel 1988, 439).

The narrative providing a mythological background for the firewalking ceremony that is most common among Draupadī cult "professionals" describes post-war events when Yudhiṣṭhira goes to Hāstinapura for his coronation, where he laments the deaths of Karṇa, who should have been king, Bhīṣma, and others who fought on the side of the Kauravas (Hiltebeitel 1988, 440). He has no desire to take up kingship when all around him he sees women mourning the loss of their husbands in battle (Hiltebeitel 1988, 440-441). Kṛṣṇa then decides to do a trick and calls Draupadī, reminds her of her birth from fire, and instructs her to create another sacrificial fire and walk though it after telling the weeping women, men, and children that if they follow her through the fire they will get back the loved ones they lost during the battle (Hiltebeitel 1988, 441). Draupadī then enters the fire and emerges unscathed because of her powers, however the men, women and children who followed her all die in the fire, their bodies are destroyed, but their souls are released to join their loved ones in heaven (Hiltebeitel 1988, 441). Now there is no weeping or wailing to deter Yudhiṣṭhira from becoming king, so now devotees walk on fire (Hiltebeitel 1988, 441).

Draupadī, through the element of her birth, destroys the bodies of the people mourning their losses. It is not her plan, but that of her counterpart Kṛṣṇa. Here, as she is in terms of the great war itself, she is instrumental in the destruction that takes place in this narrative. Draupadī convinces the weeping men, women, and children that to follow her would give them back their loved ones. The narrative has Kṛṣṇa telling

Draupadī what to do, but it is not clear if he has informed her about the result of her action. Draupadī may be ignorant of the outcome, but she still possesses the fiery characteristic of destruction.

One last post-war firewalk narrative recounts that Draupadī completes the firewalk to remove from the Pāṇḍavas the madness and sins of Brahmanicide with which they become afflicted by killing their enemies.

> In this plight, 'Krishnaswami called for Draupadī and told her, 'If you should do some penance (*tavacu* = *tapas*) to Īḵvaran (Śiva), getting into the fire-ground [*akkiṉitarai*], increasing the fire (*akkiṉi vaḷarttu*), and walking in that fire, then the Brahmanicide (*piramahattiyam*) of the five persons will go away.' Draupadī then does as Kṛṣṇa has directed, freeing the Pāṇḍavas from their sin. (Hiltebeitel 1988, 443)

This narrative has Draupadī undergo the firewalk in order to absolve the multitude of sins of her husbands. Once again, like the original dicing match, she frees her husbands from the situation in which they find themselves. However, she does so this time via her own personal strength and her connection to fire and its power to purify.

These narratives provide a mythological basis for one of the strongest links between Draupadī and fire, the practice of firewalking that her devotees undergo as a culmination of a ritual celebrating Draupadī and her role in the *Mahābhārata*.

4.2.3 Evidence of Draupadī's Association with Fire in Practice

The strongest evidence linking Draupadī and fire is the firewalking ritual performed in the Draupadī cult. The narratives discussed above present a mythological basis for this firewalk where none readily exists in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*.

Hiltebeitel's work concentrates on this cult and the ritual ceremonies that occur within it, culminating with the firewalk. His two-volume work is concentrated, detailed and cannot be fully discussed here. However, his work amply demonstrates that one cannot separate the cult of Draupadī and fire. This, partnered with the evidence presented within the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, establishes a link between Draupadī and fire that is undeniable.

The firewalk is usually the culmination in the festival, and has appeared in travelers' accounts, journals, district gazetteers and manuals, and scholarly notices (Hiltebeitel 1991, 439). However, these descriptions have been brief and say little about the connection between the firewalk and the ceremonies surrounding it (Hiltebeitel 1991, 439). The firewalking ritual itself is diverse. Its timing and structure varies depending on geographical location. To consider all of these would go far beyond the scope of this thesis. However, some staple features of the ritual remain the same. Vows taken by devotees, the presence of a fire-pit with coals, and the presence of processional images of the goddess are features that remain constant regardless of location. The firewalking rituals, as diverse as they are, have comparable structures. Hiltebeitel keeps one festival, that of the Tindivanam temple, at the center of the discussion throughout his book; however, he acknowledges that no Draupadī festival could be profitably discussed in absolute ritual entirety (1991, 2).

To begin, before undergoing the firewalk ritual, the devotee ordinarily makes a vow to walk on fire for Draupadī in a situation of distress, hoping to receive a favor or

blessing from her (Hiltebeitel 1991, 440). Hiltebeitel discusses the importance and meaning behind these vows for the devotees making them:

> Should the favor be granted before the firewalk is carried out, the firewalk fulfills a debt, offers thanks, and completes a process in which the individual and the goddess share a victory over inimical or destructive forces. But the firewalk can also be done while still hoping for the favorable outcome. A person may also vow to cross the coals any number of times, frequently over three successive festivals, but sometimes many more. So early crossings could involve supplication and later ones not only discharge of the obligation, but thanksgiving or a hoped for continuation of good health or other blessings. The most frequent impulse behind a firewalking vow is illness or disablement. The vow may be taken not only on one's own behalf, but for the sake of another, especially an ill family member (usually a child). Draupadī's favor knows no restrictions, however, and people ask her to overcome infertility, end unemployment, or bring success in business, school examinations, building a house, or even the lottery (Hiltebeitel 1991, 440).

Devotees turn to Draupadī, a goddess who is not a stranger to anger and vengeance, for things typically asked for of more benevolent gods and goddesses, such as children and success. After vows are made, the participants physically ready themselves for the firewalk by undergoing a period of purification consisting of individual variations on renunciation that mainly concern food and sexual relations. For example all meat eating ceases, the number of meals can be reduced to one or two, and smoking is discontinued (Hiltebeitel 1991, 441).

The fire is lit under the guidance of a Brahman *Aiyar* priest, in some locations, who recites mantras to purify the fire (Hiltebeitel 1991, 442). The firewalking rites at most Draupadī festivals then go through four phases: a ceremony at the bank of a tank or reservoir (or alternatively a riverbank or seacoast), a procession from the water to

the temple, rites within the temple, and the firewalk itself (Hiltebeitel 1991, 443). For the interest of this thesis I will focus solely on the firewalk itself as the other three phases go well beyond the scope of this thesis.

The firewalking ritual itself is such a spectacle that crowds often gather to observe it, filling every available vantage point and the draw of the firepit is likened to the draw of the goddess herself (Hiltebeitel 1991, 459). The observers are able to witness participants walk across the fire pit in fulfillment of a vow made to the goddess. Usually, at the far side of the firepit a shallow trench, called the "milk pit" (*pāl kuli*), has been dug out so that the firewalkers will cross it immediately after crossing the coals.[37] While approaching the firepit the procession may be quite orderly (Hiltebeitel 1991, 461). Often flowers and limes are tossed into the firepit and then removed and distributed into the crowd as *prasādam* (Hiltebeitel 1991, 461). Finally the presiding priest goes across the firepit and "milk river" followed by the mass of firewalkers who either walk or run across the coals, and then the whole procession returns to the temple (Hiltebeitel 1991, 465).

The above provides an example of a firewalking ritual, which can be as diverse as the people who participate in it. However, throughout the ritual the link between Draupadī and fire is made evident in a physical way. Draupadī's devotees in the Draupadī cult make physical contact with fire in the form of a firepit containing hot coals to beseech their goddess for help, or as a thanksgiving for blessings already bestowed upon them. Some mythological narratives have Draupadī undergo this

[37] This trench is usually filled with water, but at some diaspora sites real milk is supplied by donors, or coconut milk is used (Hiltebeitel 1991, 459).

firewalk, and so by performing the same task as the goddess her devotees become closer to her and express their devotion to her. However, Draupadī is also called the "fire mother" who is approached for protection, success, and healing. She is an embodiment of purification and thus some of her devotees approach her to purify them in some way. She is, according to the Draupadī cult and the living practice within this cult, no different from fire.

4.3 Draupadī's Link to Fire in Diesel's "Tales of Women's Suffering: Draupadi and other Amman Goddesses as Role Models for Women"

In her 2002 article, Alleyn Diesel examines the Indian Amman religion in South Africa, specifically, in Kwazulu-Natal. This religion was brought to Africa by Hindu immigrants from South India and offers a unique and valuable form of goddess veneration (Diesel 2002, 5). Diesel discusses how several powerful female figures, including Draupadī, offer women empowering role models that encourage them to challenge patriarchal societal structures and injustices to women (2002, 11).

Diesel's article focuses on a Hindu tradition in Africa, and thus far this thesis examines purely the Draupadī cult in India and Indian texts. However, characteristics of traditional Tamil religion can be found in Kwazulu-Natal, the most obvious of these being the performance of elaborate, ancient South Indian rituals, the taking of vows, the performance of austerities such as sticking pins and hooks through the body as well as firewalking, possession trances, the preoccupation with healing – both psychological and physical – which is hoped will come as a result (Diesel 2002, 7). Diesel's article

clearly presents Draupadī as linked to fire and thus provides evidence that this link is apparent in the Hindu diaspora. This goes to demonstrate how very far reaching the link between Draupadī and fire is. Here again, as seen in Hiltebeitel's work, devotees perform a firewalking ritual as part of a festival honoring Draupadī. "In general the rituals performed for the deities in South Africa appear to have been carefully preserved, so that, for example, a comparison between the ritual details in Draupadi firewalking ceremonies held in present day Kwazulu-Natal and those of South India, as researched by Hiltebeitel, reveals a remarkably close correspondence" (Diesel 2002, 7).

The firewalking festival in Kwazulu-Natal is probably the most widely attended Hindu festival and has steadily increasing attendance and attracts growing media attention (Diesel 2002, 9). However, whereas the Draupadī cult in south India has a rich mythology surrounding the Draupadī festival and firewalking ritual, in Kwazulu-Natal the ritual has largely become divorced from its mythology, with few people being aware of more than rudimentary details of various stories (Diesel 2002, 7). Despite this, the firewalking ritual for Draupadī, and other *Amman* (mother) goddesses, is growing in popularity and serves to remind a religious community, which is far from its spiritual home, of its roots (Diesel 2002, 8).

4.3.1 The Firewalk Mythology

The firewalk mythology evident in Diesel's paper corresponds with the mythology in Hiltebeitel's work on the cult of Draupadī. Again we see Draupadī transformed from wronged, wrathful woman to powerful mother goddess of fire, who is

simultaneously wrathful and pure. Although Draupadī's origin in the great classical Sanskrit epic, the *Mahābhārata*, presents her as a human female, a circa 1400 CE Tamil version of the epic includes additions which relate her apotheosis to the powerful mother goddess of fire and her annexation to the south Indian *Amman* tradition (Diesel 2002,9).

> The story of Draupadī is a dramatic epic of fortunes lost and won, of treachery and faithfulness, of defeat and final victory and vindication. A strong, spirited and outspoken woman, she was the faithful wife of the five Pandava brothers. When, through the treachery of their relatives, the Kauravas, her family lost their inheritance and went into years of exile in the forest, she courageously devoted herself to their welfare. She survived numerous attempts by men to seduce and humiliate her, her religious faith and purity bringing her safely through these ordeals. According to the Tamil version of the *Mahabharata*, when she was eventually vindicated, she demonstrated her faithfulness and purity by walking unscathed across a pit of burning coals (Diesel 2002, 9).

As Diesel indicates here, this diaspora tradition knows of Draupadī's need to demonstrate her purity by walking across the purifying fire. Her powerful and destructive characteristics, shared with fire, are demonstrated within this diaspora community as well. It is made evident in the story when, as a result of the insult to Draupadī (being dragged by her hair into the assembly hall while menstruating and the attempted disrobing), she vowed revenge, pledging not to retie her hair until she had washed it in the blood of her enemies (Diesel 2002, 9). "The insult to Draupadī reverberates throughout the rest of the epic, being regarded as justification for the awful carnage that follows" (Diesel 2002, 9). This insult then influences the rest of the conflict in the epic. She is often regarded as a valuable object to be competed for and

squabbled over, this brings disorder (*adharma*) and devastation to society in the form of a war that results in the death on a mass scale (Diesel 2002, 9). Diesel then discusses the journey of Draupadī and how it results in purification and sanctification:

> Draupadī's odyssey can be viewed as a quest for spiritual perfection where, after enduring and overcoming various trials and hardships [including the firewalk], she finally achieves victory over her adversaries and, with it, purification and sanctification. Her ultimate ordeal of walking through fire confirms and seals her divine nature, transforming her into a Goddess worthy of the worship of her devotees, who must imitate her faithfulness and virtue (Diesel 2002, 10).

And so, devotees in Kwazulu-Natal worship and pay respect to Draupadī by imitating her actions, walking across fire during Draupadī festivals. Thus they demonstrate that they too are pure, like the mother goddess of fire, and therefore worthy of her blessings.

4.3.2 Evidence of Draupadī's Association with Fire in Practice

The firewalking ritual in Kwazulu-Natal seems to be very similar to the rituals discussed by Hiltebeitel. The structure of the festivals seems to correspond, following similar patterns and timelines. Diesel says,

> As presently observed in [Kwazulu-Natal], the Draupadi firewalking festival consists on richly symbolic rituals which re-enact the central features of her mythology. For ten or 18 days (depending on the decision of the temple committee) devotees participate in various rituals and dramas which recapitulate aspects of Draupadi's story, and these reach their climax in the firewalking ritual, where a crowd of worshippers walks barefoot through the pit of coals. The Goddess is believed to precede them across the fire, spreading her (miraculous) sari over the fire and cooling the coals for them, so those with faith

> will emerge unharmed, and a new healthy state will benefit the entire worshipping community. The idea of rebirth from fire is a common theme in Hinduism (Diesel 2002, 10).

The commonalities between the festivals in Kwazulu-Natal and those found in South India can be seen even in Diesel's brief discussion about the firewalk itself.

Draupadī's devotees re-enact aspects her mythology while simultaneously participating in an action of worship, purification, or thanksgiving. Participation in various aspects of these festivals can bring empowerment to the South African Hindu community, which under the apartheid system was socially, politically, and religiously marginalized (Diesel 2002, 10). The entire worshipping community can be seen to experience a strong sense of community identity from their participation in this symbolic religious ritual and the powerful mythology behind it (Diesel 2002, 10-11). "To come through the fire unscathed, which is viewed as an affirmation of one's purity and devotion to the Goddess, is itself empowering and it is claimed by many that it brings healing" (Diesel 2002, 11).

This sense of empowerment is especially so for the women who participate in the firewalking ritual. Diesel says:

> Traditionally, the status of women in Hinduism is lower than that of men: they are expected to be permanently subject to male authority, with little independence or identity separate from their husbands. They are also expected to maintain a fairly low profile at public events. However, at *Amman* Goddess festivals in [Kwazulu-Natal], women sometimes form the majority of devotees, many of whom have stepped out of their subservient roles to perform relatively important and visible functions which bring them considerable recognition and status (2002, 11).

The ritual brings women in Kwazulu-Natal out of the home and puts them in a public setting, going against the archetypical role for a Hindu wife. During the firewalking ritual, many women experience trance possession by what they believe is one of the fierce goddesses, such as Kalī or Draupadī, which causes them to display wild behavior atypical for a respectable Hindu woman (Diesel 2002, 11). This grants women who demonstrate this link with a goddess a certain level of respect and reverence in their communities (Diesel 2002, 11).

Draupadī's fiery characteristics are somewhat atypical for a Hindu woman and wife, who are expected to be docile and to take a more subservient role within the household and within religious rituals. Draupadī is a fierce woman, quick to anger and quick to demand action; docile and subservient does not come to mind when discussing her. She often demonstrates the same power and destruction found within fire. Draupadī provides a powerful role model for women, the wildness and anger found within her (or any of the *Amman* goddesses) allows women to express something of their own stored anger against patriarchal oppression (Diesel 2002, 11). By emulating the behavior of Draupadī, women are able to act in a way that brings them a sense of independence, confidence, and worth (Diesel 2002, 11).

4.4 Conclusion

The tradition that has developed around the figure of Draupadī is a very strong living tradition. It includes its own mythology, and rituals that serve to strengthen the link between Draupadī and fire. The work of Alf Hiltebeitel and Alleyn Diesel

demonstrate this link. Draupadī's connection with fire is present in evidence from alternative versions of the *Mahābhārata* and from ritual practice. It is not just a random coincidence that the connection is present in the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, nor is it just one Westerner's interpretation of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. The evidence from the lived traditions strongly points to an association between Draupadī and fire that goes beyond the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, extending into lived traditions in South India and in the diaspora to Africa. The existence of these lived traditions places Draupadī in an exalted position; she is more to her devotees than just the heroine of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. She becomes a mother goddess and role model, beseeched for common everyday things, such as success and health, and providing an outlet for women to express anger. Draupadī is a reminder that although suffering and hardship are an inescapable part of the human experience, they need not be passively accepted and that righteous anger and determination can overcome immorality, injustice, and disorder (Diesel 2002, 13). She provides confidence and self worth; she brings a community far from its spiritual home together and allows for bonding and a sense of unity. Furthermore, the presence of the connection between fire and Draupadī in living Hindu practice shows that Hindus recognize its existence and indeed its importance. Whatever the intensions of the original *Mahābhārata* composers were, later Hindu tradition builds upon the associations between fire and Draupadī that are in the Sanskrit epic.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Draupadī's association with fire is undeniable. From her birth from a sacrificial fire altar, to her powerful and destructive but ultimately purifying influence on those surrounding her, it is clear that Draupadī shares several characteristics with fire. This association with fire is evident throughout the entirety of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* and also in living traditions that have developed around her. The fiery, passionate nature attributed to Draupadī by the Sanskrit text shapes her behavior as a wife of the Paṇḍavas and as the heroine of the epic. Through her words and actions and those of the characters surrounding her we can see that she possesses the fiery characteristics of power, destruction, and purity.

The connection between Draupadī and fire is evident throughout the classical Sanskrit epic and the language used within the text by Draupadī herself and the characters with whom she is in direct contact strengthens this connection. She is often described as "burning with anger", having a gaze under which one would "burn", and having a beauty so majestic that she is "ablaze like the flame of a fire in the night".

However, it is not only the vocabulary and imagery of fire and burning that connects Draupadī with the element from which she was born. Her words and actions fortify this connection. The Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* itself connects fire with anger again and again and it does so through more than metaphor and imagery. Draupadī possesses such passion and wrath at the injustices done to her that the audience can feel her righteous outrage and can easily sympathize with her. Draupadī's audiences within the

epic not only sympathize with her, but also get angry and sometimes violent. Because she is one of the epic's protagonists, because her personal cause is typically based on dharma, and because the epic displays other characters' responses to her words and acts, the audience outside of the epic is encouraged to identify with Draupadī and share the proper reactions of her sympathizers in the epic. Indeed, the work of Hiltebeitel and Diesel shows that Hindu audiences do sympathize and imitate such reactions.

In the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī burns with indignation and very often inspires similar feeling of wrath within her husbands. She often uses powerful words to get her feelings across and does not shy away from conflict. In fact, she instigates conflict herself. She is vocal about her needs and desires, encouraging Yudhiṣṭhira to reclaim his throne through violence, asking him again and again why his "anger does not flare up", attempting to provoke anger within him. Draupadī encourages Bhīma to exact revenge from those who violate her, resulting in the absolute destruction of Kīcaka. Draupadī's behavior might seem self-serving and there is no denying that she stands up for herself and does not tolerate abuse. However, her behavior is not based on selfish whim. As Draupadī knows and reminds her audiences (both within the epic story and outside it), her behavior rests on dharma.

Draupadī uses the language of dharma to contextualize her arguments during the disrobing and the dicing match, in her response to the sexual proposition of Jayadratha Vārddhakṣatri, the king of the Sindhus in the forest, in response to Kīcaka's sexual proposition, and in her arguments to Yudhiṣṭhira about taking up the throne. She does this in an attempt to influence the characters around her. As such, she

repeatedly battles for the sake of dharma, using her dharmic argument instead of physical weapons. In her defense of dharma, she is reminiscent of a number of fierce goddess, such as the goddess of the *Devī Māhātmya*, doing battle for the sake of dharma against the threat of disorder. Diesel discusses Draupadī's interest in dharma and how her actions challenge patriarchal society:

> Throughout the attempted disrobing as well as at other moments in the narrative, Draupadī's actions and responses are reminiscent of other fierce Goddesses: of Kali, in her victorious stance on the battlefield, and of Durga, a female figure recognizing and condemning patriarchal forces – represented by male demons – for their denial and destruction of the moral order (*dharma*) of society (*Devi Mahatmyam*). Draupadī's interest in *dharma* and justice challenges women to initiate the critique of male violence and to work for the healing of society (2002, 10).

Draupadī's righteous (i.e., dharmic) wrath has far reaching consequences. Indeed, Diesel, citing a study by Purnima Mankekar (1993), discusses the reactions of Indian women living in Delhi when viewing the disrobing of Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata* television serial. These women are inspired by Draupadī to confront injustice in their own lives:

> The women interviewed perceived Draupadi as 'an icon of women's vulnerability' so that the incident provided them with a tool with which to question the existing power structures, both in the home and in wider society (ibid: 470). They commented on the power of a woman's rage against such abuse perpetrated by males. Every woman identified in some way with Draupadi's experience of threat and humiliation, comparing this with their own daily realities of sexual harassment and exploitation, both at home and in the workplace... so powerful was their identification with Draupadi that some of the women were able to regard Draupadi's rage as a challenge to confront the injustices they and other women presently endure (ibid: 481,487)(2002, 12 citing Purnima Mankekar, 1993).

Diesel continues by describing the reaction of women living in a diaspora context, stating that these Indian women, living in Southall, London, shared the views of women living in Delhi (2002, 12). These women expressed their admiration and reverence for Draupadī, whom they viewed as a symbol of vulnerability as well as a "powerful manifestation of female rage and empowerment" (Diesel 2002, 12). This demonstrates that although female anger may be inauspicious and discouraged within traditional Hindu culture, Draupadī's anger, being just and righteous, is seen by Hindu women living in India as well as the diaspora, as a powerful weapon that can be used to challenge injustice. They commiserate with Draupadī and see her as a powerful symbol.

Not only does Draupadī possess a raw and emotionally triggered power, but she is also a destructive force. From the passage describing her birth alone we see that she was created for the destruction of others. Furthermore, it is in part because of the injustice done to her during the assembly hall scene that the great war of the epic occurs, and this war results in massive, apocalyptic destruction survived by very few. Draupadī is herself never on the battlefield as the direct physical agent of destruction, but not only does she vow that she will not rest until the Kauravas who insulted her are dead, she also urges her husbands to battle when they favor a peaceful compromise.

Draupadī is frequently presented in the epic as a personification of power and destruction, two very important characteristics of fire. However, she also embodies purification, also a characteristic of fire and one that is perhaps more culturally specific to Indian or Hindu culture than light, heat, and destructive power. That Draupadī

possesses the quality of purification is evident in its lengthy explanations and justifications of her polyandrous marriage. The text labors at length to present the audience with several justifications for her polyandrous marriage, a situation in which a woman would not be considered pure because she shares her body with not one man but five. Repeatedly, Draupadī is said to be "blameless" (*aninditā*) and the text goes so far as to explain that her virginity is restored to her after she consummates each of her five marriages. The text demonstrates Draupadī's purity to the audience in this manner and thus gifts her with another characteristic of fire, that of purification.

Draupadī's fiery characteristics are also evident within her marital relationships, which are at the heart of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, which, like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is a householder epic involving mainly the concerns of characters in the householder stage of life. As such, Draupadī's relationship with her husbands, particularly Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma, are important to the development of the plot. Some of the key events in the plot occur as a result of the interaction between Draupadī and these two men. It is during these interactions that Draupadī's fiery characteristics are made apparent. Her powerful speeches encouraging action, sometimes violent action, demonstrate her fiery nature. She turns to her husbands for protection and justice and when they fail to produce the results that she wishes, she turns to another trusted male, Kṛṣṇa, to protect her and get the revenge and justice that she seeks.

The relationship between Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa is unique. She turns to him when all of her husbands fail her. However, there is more of a connection between Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa than this. Draupadī and Kṛṣṇa both serve similar functions within the epic in

that they act for the same ends at different points in the epic. Kṛṣṇa often pushes for violence behind the scenes while Draupadī's influence is often overt and open. She is present when Kṛṣṇa is not and vice versa. Thus there is almost always one Kṛṣṇa, the male Kṛṣṇa or the female Kṛṣṇā (Draupadī) influencing the action of the epic. Both Kṛṣṇa(ā)'s represent an anti-renunciant worldview, arguing for fulfillment of one's duties (dharma) within social life as opposed to renouncing one's place in society. They both stress the importance of doing the correct dharma based on stage of life, without worry about the consequences of violent action, which is often prescribed by the dharma of the warrior caste, especially royalty in the warrior caste. And both see violence as an inevitable aspect of existence that is justified when used in defense of dharma.

Draupadī seems to be a representation of the worldview presented in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, an important religious text found within the *Mahābhārata* and a text that features Kṛṣṇa's status as the supreme divine being. The *Bhagavad Gītā's* anti-renunciant worldview implies that one must accept one's place in society and the repercussions of acts required to perform dharma. Violence is not always negative. It is an inevitable fact of existence and is positive then when conducted for the correct reasons. Dharma is, of course, the correct reason to perform any action and if violence is performed for the sake of dharma then it is justified. Draupadī knows dharma, she is aware that violence has to occur in order for the ordinances of dharma to be fulfilled. In fact, from the moment of her birth she is deemed an agent of destruction on behalf of the gods. She is a powerful embodiment of the destructive forces of fire. She propels the action of the

epic plotline forward at integral intervals, often pushing for the violence that she knows must occur so that justice and duty can be achieved. Like her counterpart Kṛṣṇa, Draupadī speaks of dharma, doing one's duty of the correct life stage and caste in which one lives, emphasizing the necessity of violence in the natural order of the world. This – the inevitable nature of violence and destruction - is a common theme in both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Thus, it becomes clear how the seemingly non-related theme of Draupadī's association with fire is related to the entire Hindu epic worldview. Draupadī's connection with fire, and its characteristics of destruction and purification, demonstrates the Hindu epic worldview, that violence is necessary in order to uphold dharma and protect cosmic order.

The fiery characteristics of Draupadī present themselves again in the living tradition that has been established with her as its central figure of worship. The tradition that has developed around the figure of Draupadī is a strong living tradition which includes its own mythology and rituals, such as the firewalking ceremony, that serve to strengthen the link between Draupadī and fire. Draupadī's connection with fire is not just a random coincidence or a handy source for colorful language and drama. The evidence from the lived traditions strongly points to an association between Draupadī and fire that goes beyond the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, extending into lived traditions in South India and in the diaspora to Africa. The existence of these lived traditions places Draupadī in an exalted position; she is more to her devotees than just the heroine of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*. She becomes a mother goddess and role model, beseeched for common everyday things, such as success and health, and

providing an outlet for women to express anger. Furthermore, the presence of the connection between fire and Draupadī in living Hindu practice shows that Hindus recognize the connection and, indeed, its religious importance. Whatever the intensions of the original *Mahābhārata* composers were, later Hindu tradition builds upon the associations between fire and Draupadī that are in the Sanskrit epic.

Draupadī's association with fire is clear throughout the epic's portrayal of her, her marriages, her role as epic heroine. From the moment of her birth from a sacrificial fire altar, the connection strengthens as the plot unfolds and it shapes her interactions with her husbands. Draupadī's birth from fire is no mere co-incidence, nor some insignificant dramatic or mythic embellishment. Rather, Draupadī's personality, behavior, and marital relationships have characteristics that, according to Hindu thinking, the element fire also possesses such as power, destruction, purification, and passion. Her fiery connection is also evident within the living tradition that has formed with Draupadī as its central deity, elevating her status from heroine of the classical Sanskrit *Mahābhārata* to supreme mother goddess of fire, looked to for assistance in many forms and beloved by her worshippers. From fire she emerged, and through the fiery rituals and ceremonies of the Draupadī cult she is revered.

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