



# The Masks of Superheroines

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## **Abstract:**

Marvel universe and adaptations of Mahabharata are both representations of popular cultures in contemporary space. Their popularity increased in post two thousand eras, highlighting the modern adaptation techniques to revise and insert new perspectives. This paper considers two female characters named Natasha Romanoff, also known as Black Widow and Draupadi, to disclose the idea of the masquerade in postfeminist approaches. Though these famous characters have undergone many multimedia adaptations, however, this paper examines the comic and film adaptations of their stories.

**Keywords:** comic studies, film studies, adaptation studies, postfeminism, popular culture

"Womanliness . . . could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it . . . The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade.' My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing." ( Riviere 306).

## **Introduction**

As a popular entertainer, Marvel occupies two media spaces: comics and films known as Marvel Comics and Marvel Cinematic Universe or MCU. All the characters are part of MCU adaptations of Marvel Comics that have entertained the audience for many years. However, the representations of the same characters are entirely different, along with the storyline that makes the Marvel Cinematic Universe more popular. In contrast, Mahabharata, a long-known Indian Epic, gets its first comic adaptations with the Indian cartoonist Anant Pai through his *Amar Chitra Katha*. Initially, these comics served as a part of the children's entertainment industry; however, post two thousand, the revised and comprised version, along with better representation, drew the attention of adult readers and research scholars. Moreover, post two thousand, the number of media adaptations of these books makes them a worthy topic for adaptation studies.

This paper particularly focuses on the idea of the masquerade. The concept of a feminine masquerade was initially developed by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1929). In her study, Riviere argues that 'womanliness' is indistinguishable from the masquerade, which is adopted by women who desire to occupy masculine spaces to allay the cultural anxiety brought on when women supposedly encroach upon masculine roles. (qt in Kent 94). The selected characters both belong to a male-dominated world. They work hard to earn their places but eventually create a confused position of neither completely male nor female superheroes. This paper highlights the question of their act of looking powerful and if the power is just a mask.

Romanoff and Draupadi are surrounded by heroes who have extraordinary bloodlines or superweapons, making them eligible fighters to save the world. At the same time, Romanoff is a well-trained Russian spy who is brainwashed to defect to the US government, becomes a member of SHEILD, and eventually protects the place. Her identity is represented as that of a confused one, just like her costume, as both keep a veil for no reason. However, Draupadi is referred to as a "Yagnaseni," that is, who is born out of the fire. Being a "Divyajanna," one with a sacred birth, she is supposed to be more powerful than any other character as her appearance and dialogue reveal fire essence in her. However, the storyline in *Amar Chitra Katha* only represents her as female seeking help from male characters whenever she is in distress. However, this story's post two thousand era television adaptation changed her appearances and dialogues without changing the main plot. Nevertheless, in both cases, the audience sees Romanoff as a non-superhero character without any super weapon or power wearing a mask to hide the identity of confused femineity and fighting hard to get a place in the superhero

realm. Draupadi wears a mask of a powerful woman having an extraordinary birth yet not fighting for herself but seeking men to avenge her. This paper discusses the particular masks of these characters in questioning their superhero status.

### The Dusky mask and a Bluish heroine

Natasha Romanoff is first introduced as an antagonist in the *Ironman* comic series *Tales of Suspense* by the creator and plot writer Stan Lee. Later she was given her special series by Marvel comics named *Amazing Adventures*. The first appearance of Romanoff in the comic series is of a woman wearing an evening gown with a veil. Later she was given a costume of an arsenal of high-tech weaponry, including a pair of wrist-mounted energy weapons known as "Widow's Bite" and a dusky mask. Romanoff, known as Romanova in the Marvel comic series, is a well-known spy and later an ally to the US government has no use of the mask that cannot even protect her from antagonist past or physical harm. However, the usage of a mask defines her attempt to hide feminine perspectives and look like her contemporary male superhero like Hawkeye, and Ironman, who wear masks. Romanova plays a crucial role in *Marvel Comics*, especially in forming the team of Avengers; however, her treatment in the comic world is more of a guest appearance specialist who has a series of guest appearances in *Spiderman verse* comics. Though her appearances are important in the whole story, spiderman remains the hero of those comics.

In Anant Pai's *Amar Chitra Katha*, the composite picture of Draupadi is essentially one of a woman negotiating the public and private spaces in society between kingship and exile, duty and assertion, loyalty and rejection. In our long literary history, Draupadi remained unparalleled in personifying womanhood in its wholesomeness and uniqueness with all its glory, horror, retaliation, and resilience. Her complex and contradictory nature make her versatile and hence a character who has been long debated. Writers and critics have long drawn comparisons with the other legendary characters, as Draupadi stands out as a singular woman throughout Mahabharata. She relied on her inner strength and unwavering faith. In Pai's representation also, she is not only a princess but a driving force of the comic epic; in volume 3 of the series, when Arjun asks Barbaric, the spectator of the whole eighteen-day-long devastating war, about his perspective of the war, he replied, he replied that the war is all about Krishna who is the hero and the villain and Draupadi who is the heroine of the war. Unlike Romanova in *Marvel Comics*, Draupadi doesn't seek a place to prove herself as a superheroine. Draupadi is a superheroine by birth, representations, appearance and dialogues. Yet, the question of showcasing fake power remains in the plot representation like Romanova in *Marvel comics*.

The opinions on Draupadi vary according to her role in various adaptations. Yet as a character, she commands a whole range of contradictory meanings. In comics, she was born to King Drupada of the Panchala kingdom in an intense spiritual sacrifice to seek revenge on Dronnacharya. Draupadi arose from the sacrificial platform immediately after the birth of her brother Dhristadymana who, too, had emerged from the same fire. From the very beginning ACK, describes her as "dark and beautiful, [who] will bring about the destruction of the Kauravas (ACK, *Draupadi*, 2)". Draupadi, beyond doubt, has been depicted as extraordinarily beautiful who is blessed with a fine frame and divine beauty. Vyasa categorically stated that the creator had so fashioned her that her loveliness surpassed that of all women and enchanted everyone. She is referred to as "Krishna," meaning the dark one in the epic; Draupadi's different names travel along the epic to occupy various metaphorical connotations. Another significant feature in the comic art of Draupadi is that she is given a blue body supporting the male superhero of the epic, Krishna. Though Draupadi is ornamented with powerful dialogues and representations, the question remains of her seeking help from other male characters and the blue body colour that makes her the subordinate of the superhero.

Whereas the earlier representations in *Amar Chitra Katha* depicted Draupadi's presence as a divine and powerful one, to the readers' utter surprise, the *Game of Dice* episode projects her as a simple human asking for help instead of fighting for herself. In the game of rigged dice, after losing his kingdom and wealth, Duryodhana tempted Yudhishthira to stake Draupadi, and by staking her in one last game, he might as well win all he has lost. Yet, the stars favoured Duryodhana once again, and Yudhishthira lost all his claims of kingship and his rights as a husband to Draupadi. With triumphant cries soaring from Kauravas's section, Duryodhana, intoxicated with pride, ordered Draupadi to come before all in the assembly hall.

Dragged forcefully by Dushshasana into the assembly hall by her hair, Draupadi as a victim still defies being put into the victim zone. Her hair which for the moment has accentuated her subject-position of a victim further becomes instrumental in her fight against her tormentors. Her refusal to tie or knot them till she had her revenge on Duryodhana and Dushshasana proves hair to be a field of signification. Alf Hiltebeitel and Barbara D. Millers have noted that hair is not a "natural symbol" but a zone of semiotic meanings. Hair, as a product of our biological inheritance, cannot be ignored as it articulates many meanings in different cultures. The cultural control of hair or keeping it in a culturally defined

natural state speaks volumes about cultural indoctrination and ideology. Here the readers recognize the mask of fake power on Draupadi hiding the original picture of a helpless woman that society expects. In the comic appearances, both characters have a colour in common: a dusky bluish shade. Though this shade is used to give them the appearance of superheroines, it makes a mask for Black Widow and a shade of fake power in Draupadi, making both subordinates before the male superheroes.

### The Mask of Power

In the TV adaptations, Draupadi evolves from a person gifted with rare and subtle beauty to a woman bent on seeking revenge on her tormentors, thereby levelling the injustice meted out to her. Here, she is a woman of extraordinary beauty with a fiery temperament; for men, she is both the temptation and terror. She was the first woman to challenge the long-held axiom of social life that the wife is a possession of her husband. In Swastik Production House, the role of Draupadi, played by Pooja Sharma, one sees a confident woman who sets the terms for her Swayamvar so that her chosen prince may win her. In her, one also sees the shrewd woman who invoked caste to dismiss the candidacy of the Kama, another equally competent suitor. The incidents in her life add to the contradictions in her persona. By overcoming self-pity and the degeneration of women, Draupadi justified not only her rage but also dominated the

patriarchal narrative with the "liberation discourse," which was so far unheard of in the case of women. In this TV adaptation, she is dressed in red clothing with heavy eye makeup projecting the fiery essence of the character. She is given powerful dialogues from her birth episode where she questions her father, king Drupad's dislike for the girl child as she can't avenge him. The scriptwriter tries hard to give some extra power in the *Game of dice* episode wherein Draupadi calls Agni to destroy the Kauravas for her disrespect. However, in these representations, the attitude remains the same of the dam shell in distress asking for help from Agni or Dharma, who eventually saves her from being disrobed. Nevertheless, readers must remember that Pai's compilation of Mahabharata in the form of a comic is to revive the story in a new form of literature; hence, it does not have the purpose of interpretation. However, the media adaptation of the series in 2013 under Swastik Production House brings in the interpretive perspective of the story, underlining the difference between the two forms of adaptation: comics and media adaptation.

Romanova was introduced as Romanoff (Scarlet Johansson) in Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2010 in the *Iron Man* movie. Her presence differs completely from her character in the comic as she is introduced as a well-wisher of Ironman and a member of S.H.I.E.L.D., a superhero organization. She made her first on-screen action debut with the film *Avengers* in a black latex costume with no veil or mask. However, the audience can easily locate the mask of confused femininity more than the superhero aspect of this character, even in the film adaptations. Natasha Romanoff is re-introduced in *The Avengers* in a scene of a classically feminine victim of violence. The first shot features a close-up of Romanoff being hit in the face in a little black dress, bound to a chair, and looking up at her detainers, two Russian gangsters. The boss threatens her in Russian and flips the chair back, throwing her over the edge of the platform on which the scene takes place. The mobster says ironically, "The famous Black Widow . . . And she turns out to be simply another pretty face"; Romanoff replies even more sarcastically, "You think I'm pretty?" which threatens the male ego of the mobsters.

The boss gets a call, and Romanoff says the call is for her. She crammed the phone on her shoulder as S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Coulson tells her she is needed in the headquarters of the Avengers as her love interest, Clint Barton, has been compromised. Her irate reply is, "Are you kidding? I'm working . . . I'm in the middle of the interrogation. This moron is giving me everything." The reply states that this is just another day at the job for her. These contemptuous remarks portray her as the boss of this threatening situation. In an expected reversal of the women-in-refrigerators narrative, Coulson's information about her love interest in distress made her change the situation and decide to get rid of it. Romanoff single-handedly overpowers the Russians in a tied-to-the-chair dramatic action scene. This scene is paralleled by Coulson waiting for her to finish the fight; she defeats the mobsters within seconds, and a close-up shot of her black high heels is shown as she walks away.

On the one hand, she is represented as a powerful fighter, and one can also see her being emotional and changing decisions when it concerns her lover. These scenes hardly defy and rather follow cultural expectations of the emotional perspectives of women ignoring their intelligence and combat capability. "However, it also incorporates postfeminist sentiments in that her apparent victimization is merely another ironic postfeminist feminine persona (or mask)." (Kent 98). The irony is very significant in these scenes, as Romanoff is very feminine through her dress and victimized position, which contrasts her deadly combat skills. Cristina Lucia Stasia highlights "the importance of women's appearance and fashion within postfeminist discourses, stating that images of girls 'kicking ass' proliferate in magazines and marketers have exploited the market potential of postfeminist girls who think it is cool that girls can kick ass— but are more interested in purchasing the designer stiletto the girl is kicking ass in." (Stasia 237). Fashion plays an important role in masculine heroism in this postfeminist approach as she picks up the heels and asks Coulson about Clint Barton. Romanoff's kick-ass and emotional side are both highlighted in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*; both are two different postfeminist masks that she wears to focus power and femininity simultaneously; however, it ultimately questions and showcases her confused femininity. However, the *Marvel comics* only showcase the action superheroine.

Romanoff is established as an action heroine at the beginning of the movie *The Avengers* with the captive scene. Then the audience sees her as a heroine using emotions as a mask when she is tasked with collecting information from Loki, the god of the trickster, whose exact plan is unknown. He intends to wreak havoc on the world. In this scene audience sees Romanoff approaching Loki in a glass chamber as he says, "After whatever tortures [Nick] Fury can concoct, you would appear as a friend, as a balm. And I would cooperate"; the dialogue clearly states that Loki considers Romanoff the caring team member because of her gender and also considers that she is sent to win the situation and his mind because he might open up before a woman. Romanoff takes advantage of this situation and expected femininity and describes how she was brainwashed to kill innocent people in her past. Clint Barton spared her life and gave him another chance to live a meaningful life. She concludes, "I got red in my ledger, and I'd like to wipe it out." Her body language clearly states her defensive, unsettled emotional position that embarks Loki's masculine thoughts as he likes to see the expected vulnerability of a female figure. Her vulnerability embarks on masculinity juxtaposed in Loki's body language as he says ruthlessly, "This is the basest sentimentality. This is a child at prayer. Pathetic!". He slams the glass door, making Romanoff jump back in fright as he continues saying that he will make Barton kill her and awaken him to the guilt for the rest of his life. Romanoff reacts to these misogynistic insults by sniffing audibly and saying, "You're a monster," satisfying Loki's male ego. Loki replied with an evil laugh, "Oh no, you brought the monster." The next shot was a complete reverse in dramatic action and crescendo of music as Romanoff tilted her head up, baffling Loki and revealing to the other team members that Loki plans to unleash the Hulk on the Avengers to cause destruction and break up the team. Romanoff played with Loki's schema of appropriate femininity, pretending dam shell in distress. Similar to the opening scene, Romanoff again wears the mask of the expected victim of femininity and emotions.

Though Romanoff is a tough fighter, the greatest asset of her character, as shown in all the media adaptations of the comics, are emotions that crave a family and even cry for a family. Apart from these scenes, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon 2015), Romanoff acts only as a love interest to Bruce Banner as her job is to calm the Hulk. She refers to herself as a "Monster" for her

incapability to produce a child as she is sterilized during her spy training, defining the postfeminist concept and maintaining the role, such as motherhood, of the binarist gender order of a woman. Romanoff has inadequate screen time, and in a maximum of the Avengers movies, when she plays an important role, the limelight is eventually drawn by other superheroes like Ironman or Captain America as she remains confused about how to act like an appropriate superheroine.

### Conclusion

Romanoff and Draupadi act according to the expected femininity; Romanoff exploits others using dominant notions of femininity, whereas Draupadi tries to act like a powerful heroine suppressing the notions of femininity. Romanoff and Draupadi reverse between the roles of an emotional lady and a tough fighter reflecting Riviere's concept of the Masquerade "that there is no genuine womanliness to speak of underneath the mask. This results in a sort of feminine identity crisis in which the heroic persona may be yet another mask of femininity. Heroic feminine subjectivity thus becomes elusive and intangible, begging the question of where and who these heroines 'actually' are" (Kent 100). The merit of such a confusing approach and representation is questionable as it maintains the norms of the gender binary and expectations of how men and women behave. The portrayal of Draupadi and Romanoff is dependent on the traditional norms of femininity that women are associated with weakness and sentimentality, even if they are born out of the fire and a superheroine saving the world. This way of presenting the idea of masquerade brings in more gender complexities that these adaptations indicate clearly. As McRobbie writes, "Masquerade takes into account constructionist accounts of gender, which hold that notions of any 'true' essence of gender are social constructs, drawing attention to femininity's artifice, only to reframe these activities within a consumerist-capitalist system, ultimately reinstating the patriarchal symbolic" (McRobbie 64). Natasha Romanoff is introduced as an 'ordinary' woman before being revealed as a superheroine, and Draupadi is a superheroine by divine birth; however, these characters are eased into these narratives through a mechanism based on a disguise of feminine masks and fake power masks. They demonstrably present various configurations of empowered contemporary femininity. These adaptations, therefore, present women's subjectivities that hinge on the notion of femininities that can be readily exchanged for one another but are nonetheless encompassed by the criteria of the idealized postfeminist subject. Thus, these heroines move between different versions of culturally sanctioned femininity enabled by postfeminist discourses to be integrated into the heroic narrative. Though they are designated as superheroines fighting along with superheroes, projecting male expected femininity trying to fit in society's expected female norms that question their superhero status and powers as well.

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