

Demythifying the Myth

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Mahabharata is the treasure house of knowledge, philosophy and morality. Innumerable interpretations are written based on it over centuries. The majestic sweep of the grand *Mahabharata* remains a favourite trope among writers for retelling characters and stories. Paula Richman comments on *The Mahabharata*:

The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant variations which changed the conceptualization of character, event and meaning. (4)

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* is one of the most brilliant retellings which brings to the forefront the broader and deeper aspects of the character Draupadi. Though the most powerful and beautiful character in the *Mahabharata*, she is the most misunderstood and sacrificing character in the epic. She has to face traumatic moments in her life and is accused of being the cause of the most devastating war of all time. Ray's *Yajnaseni* sheds new light on the character of Draupadi from an altogether different perspective. All epic characters are portrayed as persons having ordinary human qualities and sentiments. They are depicted with people having human foibles and not as superhumans. Irawati Karve writes:

.... the scope of *Mahabharata* is wide ranging, in time, in space and its cast of characters. Heroes and cowards, villains and good men, impulsive and fools and wise men, ugly men and fair ones are all depicted in the course of its narrative. Almost no person is portrayed as all good or all bad. (80)

In *Yajnaseni*, Pratibha Ray focuses on the feminine woes and worries of the eponymous character, Draupadi. Simone de Beauvoir says:

It becomes an approach to disown the fundamental male, dialectic of history and narrative in which women emerge only in a contributive role, where the sovereign subjectivity of women is relegated. In male narrative historiographies, women play the role of other, the dominated and marginalized: knowing oneself as a woman is to know oneself as the other. (1949)

Pratibha Ray gives her own version of the iconic figure of Draupadi by bringing to focus on the internal thought process. Ray's Draupadi can be any woman caught up in the trap of destiny who sacrifices her dreams for the welfare of the family. Contrary to the conventional figure of Draupadi who is projected as a strong and powerful lady, Ray's Draupadi is a person who silently and willfully succumbs to all injustices inflicted on her. She becomes a symbol of an ordinary Indian woman who is just a pawn in the hands of the patriarchal world where men make the rules and women silently accept them. Though born in a royal family, as the daughter of king Dhruvad, wedded to five Pandava kings, she had to go through extreme mental agony and loneliness.

Yajnaseni endures all dishonor and ignominy with a calm mind because she places the unity and integrity of her family above everything else. She shows a high sense of moral obligation. Though she questions the injustices done to her, she does that not in a rebellious manner. She goes through all traumatic situations with her inner strength and her staunch trust in her spiritual companion Krishna.

Draupadi is introduced as a young girl who is waiting to be united with her Krishna. She herself is called Krishna in her royal household. Young Krishna grew up by listening to her father saying, "O-Krishna It is to you that I shall offer my Krishna. On giving Krishna into your hands my lost honour will return. It is for this that Krishna's birth has taken place" (9). The writer deliberately tries to redefine the theme of relationship of Draupadi with Krishna and Karna in the novel. Ray is trying to reveal the unfair treatment given to Draupadi by her kith and kin. The writer gives a psycho-analytical analysis of the character Draupadi. She was often accused of polyandry but actually, she became the pivot upon which the entire Pandava clan were tied together.

Ray's Draupadi moves out of the pages of the epic and becomes a woman of contemporary relevance. She becomes an embodiment of patience, virtue and bravery. She epitomizes a woman trapped by circumstances. First having given her heart to Krishna (then told by Krishna himself that her destiny lies elsewhere) and then to

Arjun, she had to split her loyalties with five husbands, each with his own vicissitudes and idiosyncrasies. She takes the spiritual support of Krishna in her moments of doubts and confusion. She had to adjust herself to the vicarious attitudes of her husbands. Though she loved Arjun deeply she had to wait till the turn of Yudhishtir and Bhim to get over so that she can consummate her love for Arjun. That long wait was really painful for her. Dividing her body and her heart with different people is harrowing for women. Draupadi faced those moments with her inner courage and her high sense of responsibility. She emerged as a multifaceted personality, compassionate and fiery at the same time. Though submissive she asserted herself when occasion arose.

Pratibha Ray tries to de-mythify the character of Draupadi in her *Yajnaseni* by portraying her as ordinary women having all the foibles and virtues. Narrated in the first person, the readers will be able to relate with Ray's Draupadi. The writer effectively employs monologues, soliloquies and musings which powerfully bring out the inner psyche of the characters.

Unlike the courageous and bold epic character who is powerful enough to question the elders in *Kaurava Sabha* as seen in the *Dyuta Parva* in the original epic, Ray's Draupadi finds her solace by laying down all her worries in the feet of Krishna. She says :

I do not want an entire life. Even for a moment , with the hand of a worker , the eyes of a knower , the heart of a devotee let me be born for your sake, die for your sake. Sakha, it is you who are the world, the universe. Living and dying for you means living and dying for the world. On being born thus, perhaps I may be freed of the faults of the present birth. My life will become meaningful."(398)

Though meek and submissive, she raises her voice when her honour is questioned even when her husbands remain silent. During the time of disrobing she asks, "I do not beg for anyone's pity. I demand justice. To protect the honor of a woman is the dharma of a king. Then does it befit the Kuru kings to insult the bride of their own clan?"(238). Ray's Draupadi undergoes her trials and tribulations in a calm and composed manner and tries to make her life meaningful by doing social service towards the end of the story. She tries to derive pleasure by extending her love and affection to the less fortunate people around her. She believes in doing her duty and not expecting anything in return. She realizes the futility of war and considers it a bloody painful affair. She advocates that it should be avoided at any cost. She says, "Having seen war,- bloodshed, death, lamentation, all for the kingdom, my mind's attachment to throne, wealth; possessions had been broken. No delight was left in becoming queen" (377). The relation between Draupadi and Kunti in the novel is noteworthy. More than a daughter-in-law, Draupadi was a friend and confidante to Kunti. She becomes a source of consolation for Kunti in many crucial situations of her life. Once when Kunti was in a depressed state, Draupadi says to her:

Ma, what is your sorrow ?Can I not share it? What shall I do for you? say something .It is on your word that I wrote such a chapter in the history of this world as had never been written before by marrying five brothers .Now what impossible task can there still be that I will not be able to perform ?Why are you wasting away?(354).

Ray's Draupadi is a duty-bound woman trying to do justice to all the roles she was destined to be, still holding her head high at times of crisis. Her character appeals to the modern feminine sensibility. She is bestowed with all human sentiments and foibles which endears her to generations of readers. The Retelling of mythical stories isolates epic characters and sheds lime light on them, delineating them with utmost care. The concept of individual uniqueness is foregrounded by such retellings. In *Yagnaseni* the tangible and intangible worlds of a woman get unfolded with all its nuances.

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