

THE POLITICS OF SUBVERSION: AN ANDROCENTRIC READING OF *YAJNASENI*

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the ancient Indian epic - *The Mahabharata* – highly reflexive of the Indian socio-cultural convention. It has been a definitive cultural narrative in the building of masculine, feminine and alternate gender norms. Its core follows Pandavas from their birth, childhood and polyandrous marriage to Draupadi, through their penetrating breach with their cousins, through the eighteen-day Kurukshetra war and its after-effects to their deaths and even to their life after death. Although numerous versions of *The Mahabharata* have been penned by different authors, many of the versions seem to focus only on male champions. Such categories marked prejudice against the female sex. Renowned writer Pratibha Ray, through her novel, *Yajnaseni*, narrates *The Mahabharata* through the eyes of Draupadi, thus shattering this prejudice. This paper aims at analysing this novel in the light of female subversion and the Androcentric approach to the story.

[Key words: cultural convention, *The Mahabharata*, Androcentrism, Gender norms, Female subversion]

I. INTRODUCTION

Pratibha Ray retells *The Mahabharata* through the eyes of Draupadi, in one of her best-selling novels, *Yagnaseni*. Although Draupadi enjoys a place of pride among the *Panchakanyakas* in Indian mythology, she is looked down upon as woman who played a paramount role in one of the greatest wars in Indian mythology. Draupadi, ironically, is the most prominent character of the Mahabharata, who is simultaneously the most talented heroine of the epic, as also the most misconstrued, suffering and tragic character. Pratibha Ray efforts

to put forth the androcentric narration in her choice of portraying the story from Draupadi's point of view and angle of narration. She infact questions the otherwise male-centric narration of *The Mahabharata*. Such a re-reading of history through an entirely different perspective is highly relevant in the contemporary love-starved and war-torn world. Prathibha Ray takes us back to a period of history and myth through her *Yagnaseni*. The novel discovers Draupadi's life, her magical delivery from fire as the daughter Of a king before backing her vivacious balancing act as a woman with five spouses who Have been evaded out of their father's realm. Draupadi is glided into their search to claim back their patrimony, remaining at the brothers side through years of banishment and a dreadful civil war. Meanwhile, we never lose vision of her convoluted friendship with the arcane Krishna or her secret allure to the mysterious man who is her spouse's most dangerous foe. She is unconventional in her infidelity, action, powerful capabilities and completely different approach or socio-cultural construct. The great Indian epic of Mahabharata stands testimony to the irrefutable character of a brave and bold woman who faces emotional dilemma and trauma of insult at the courtroom. Draupadi is by far an unparalleled character in the Indian mythological scene. Pratibha Ray has made an exquisite endeavour to produces a complete tale, with some part even complementing the original.

II. ANALYSIS OF PRATIBHA RAY'S YAJNASENI

Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* takes us on a tour of the mindscape of Draupadi, who is accused of being responsible for one of the severest wars in the Indian Mythology. She has to bear the brunt of the society as the harbinger of war that was instrumental in the transformation of an entire clan, facing the contempt and stigma attached to her name by an entire race. She is reduced to the deplorable state of a morally corrupt individual. Even though the epic Mahabharata tries to glorify the character of Draupadi, it actually maligns her character with the reference of some fatal traits like self-confidence, arrogance, pride and insult paramount in her character traits. Draupadi displays unusual fortitude of mind. There is no reference to any pre-marital affair and she goes for the customary decision of swayamvara – the act of choosing a groom for herself. She obeyed the decision of her swayamvara in her own spirit.

Draupadi has been replaced by wild imagination in *Yagnaseni*. The Draupadi of Pratibha Ray is overwhelmed with delight when she is confronted by a lovelorn Karna who appears in front of her with a blue rose. She is enamoured by karna and says: "Till my husbands do not know that I am fond of blue roses". This thought of

Draupadi's, who is otherwise constructed as an embodiment of morality and righteousness, holds a morally bankrupt figure that holds the love of a stranger (Karna) when her own husbands are unaware of this infidelity. Ray further delves into the recesses of Yagnaseni's mind when Arjuna is out for an exile of twelve years and he marries again, Draupadi is portrayed to be indulged in a sport of swimming in the Yamuna. In course of her swimming, she falls into the swift current and it is Karna who rescues her from drifting away. The story has it that Draupadi enjoys Karna's embrace as he lifts her from the waters. This shatters her otherwise righteous and moral character and displays her as a normal woman of flesh and blood, who has her own share of erotic behaviour and emotional weakness. Her infatuation for Karna is exhibited at its peak when she quietly puts up with his abuses and words of insult. Karna refuses to accept food from her saying that she is like a harlot in his eyes. And astoundingly, even such a grave remark of insult to a woman of high birth like Draupadi, does not instigate her anger.

Ray further philosophises on her views on women's education when her character Shakuni comments about Draupadi's education thus: "The greatest offense a woman commits is to try to be learned. It is because she became wise and scholarly that her condition is thus!" (Ray 238). Bhima wants woman to be obedient to her husband. This in turn shows that rather than trying to give an equal position to a learned woman, the male characters of the novel often try to keep them at an inferior level. Draupadi herself, inspite of being a strong character, succumbs to this moral obligation of a dutiful wife as expected from the patriarchal view. Ray's Draupadi is the fulcrum of the narrative text and gives voice to the hitherto unheard feminine. Draupadi is a mythological feminine protagonist that has been subject to multifarious interpretations and modifications over time and at the hands of different authors. In *Yajnaseni* she is archetypal of the abuse and trauma of a married woman. Even her name – Panchali – although actually refers to "the daughter of Panchal king" – is also indicative of the "five partners" she shared. This is indeed derogatory in its connotation based on Indian ethos. In this text wife is seen as a commodity earned by the son and Kunti advises her sons to share it equally among themselves. Draupadi is seen as an entity to hold the household together.

Marriage has been from time immemorial, a business deal among rulers, which puts a seal of alliance or expansion of the kingdom. Mythology also serves as an authority in this regard and The Mahabharata expounds numerous such alliances in its story line. And a character like Draupadi bears her import even to this day as a universal character. She is a victim and a witness of polygamy and infidelity in marriage and has to survive with co-wives of her husbands. *Yajnaseni* becomes a tale that questions the chastity of a woman. Although it is a

known fact that Hidumbi was pregnant with Bhima's child when he married Panchali, yet he expects virginity from his bride Panchali. It is believed that after her time with each spouse, Draupadi would remain virgin. It was a boon she had obtained. This is highly ironic that the female is expected to be chaste and a virgin whereas there is neither the need nor any procedure to ensure celibacy among the masculine. Strange are the ways of the society – whether in the past or in the present – where women are expected to be dutiful, sincere and chaste and the men can have their own way in the social construct. Besides celibacy, women were also expected to uphold certain other values, one among which was the concept of serving all the male members of the family, any external guests and then finally she was permitted to have her food.

In *The Mahabharata*, Draupadi becomes the quintessence of matriarchy during their forest survival. To this effect, she had another blessing – that of the *Akshayapatra* - the pot ever filled with food, which was given to her by Dharma Raja and the condition lay that it would become empty after Draupadi herself had her food. Till then it could serve as many people as needed: “The inexhaustible vessel was in my hands, but the whole day I had to keep hungry. For after I had eaten, food in that vessel would be finished for that day. Therefore until everyone had eaten in the morning, at noon and at night I had to remain fasting faithfully, waiting for unexpected guests till midnight”(268). Draupadi's portrayal as a typical Indian woman who would have food only after the entire household and the guests have had their fill, is more than evident in this scene. Thus, Draupadi had her food from the *Akshayapatra* only after each of her husbands completed their meal for the entire day. This is a typical androcentric cultural practice followed in India since time immemorial. The women of the family eat after everyone finish their food. In spite of such superhuman values, Draupadi is also reflexive of base feminine tendencies like envy – which is very evident in her attitude towards Hidumbi in case of Bhima; but on the whole, Yagnaseni loved all and was loved by all alike. The text rather paints Draupadi as a slave of her five husbands. All her sentiments and feelings showcased a great deal of sacrifice when she changed her life style for each husband as she shared her moments with each one individually. Draupadi is featured as an ordinary woman who abides by her husbands in every sense and managed to keep an amicable relationship with her five husbands simultaneously.

Yajnaseni, the story of Draupadi, can be read in the light of Postcolonialism. Ray asserts her ideological stances through Draupadi as a postcolonial Indian woman who is doubly marginalised. She was exploited by the patriarchy of her own family and also at the cruel hands of the offensive coloniser – the Kauravas. In this

sense Kurukshetra war can be considered as the war for independence for the matriarch, Yagnaseni. The protagonist expresses the miseries and the limitations of the colonized woman. At the end of the Kurukshetra war, everything is redefined and she starts a new life as envisaged by Lord Krishna. The postcolonial Draupadi is fearful to express her thoughts to her friend, Lord Krishna, who plays a significant role in the *Mahabharata* to initiate, preserve, and protect Dharma. His relation with Draupadi is Platonic and immaculate. But in Pratibha Ray's portrayal of Mahabharata the Draupadi – Krishna relation also suffers wishful thinking. It is said in *Yagnaseni* that, when she was sharing her bed with her other husbands, except Arjuna, she imagined that she was mating with Lord Krishna.

Epics have commemorated the virtues of chastity and sincerity as best as possible. Draupadi finds her own exoneration of her polyandrous existence with the establishment of the concept that the body is made of five elements (*Panchabhootas*) and that the Pandavas are born out of *Panchabhootas*. Since Lord Krishna was well cognizant of the catastrophe that would be faced by Draupadi, he presents her with the soothing stone of *Indraneelam* that would wade off her mental conflicts if she took a look at it. Krishna also initiates Maya to be the closest friend (Sakhi) of Draupadi. This friendship also helps Draupadi in finding a solution to any problems she would face. Thus Krishna also plays the part of a counsellor who suggests proper psychological approach to all matters of concern. This is how Draupadi is easily swayed by Krishna as he chooses.

III. CONCLUSION

Pratibha Ray's *Yagnaseni* is considered as a gynocentric novel par excellence. Pratibha Ray's determined effort for the balanced portrayal of Draupadi is not a successful one, though. In the novel, Yagnaseni forms a morally unsteady character. Draupadi, the mythological queen is the epitome of unusual strength of mind; but in *Yagnaseni* she is portrayed as the one who has pre-marital likings for others, criticises the male characters to great extent, and is an epitome of loose character and an infidel mind. *The Mahabharata* was an epic about Gods, demi-Gods, kings, princes, and warriors. But Pratibha Ray's plot provides a re-arrangement to the epic. The readers get to see people and events through the perspective of the narrator, which is pertinently different and thoroughly fascinating. Thus *Yagnaseni* provides a re-writing and a re-reading of the age old Mythological narrative and provides it a thorough phallogocentric voice and a male-centric world, although viewed through the feminine eye.

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