

Gender Dissent in Epic Adaptations: The Voice, Stance and Emancipation of *Yajnaseni* by Pratibha Ray

Lakshmi K. Raghavan & D. Lourdhu Mary

Abstract

Yajnaseni, originally written in Oriya by Dr. Pratibha Ray, a Jnanapith award winner, portrays a gynocentric perspective of the world famous Indian epic Mahabharata by reframing it through the eyes of Draupadi- the mythical heroine who has been by and large construed as an unconventional feminist for her times. At the heart of the neo-interpretation is Draupadi who is not just any woman but a decisive metaphorical figure in the popular Indian culture. Her exploits have seen multiple adaptations in the form of an unnaturally virtuous, bold, obedient and intellectual woman of the bygone era. Dr. Ray, drawing upon the principles of gynocriticism, reclaims Draupadi's narrative by examining the complexities of her experiences as a woman within a male-dominated world. This work of fiction, restated in the epistolary style delves deep into Draupadi's conscience and posits her as a recalcitrant archetype who seeks to reveal the intertwined layers of the female psyche in an exceedingly patriarchal social set up. The text further reflects themes of existential feminism, as Draupadi wrestles with the absurdities of societal expectations and strives to assert her agency against the oppressive norms that confine her identity. The author has succeeded in articulating her voice of dissent, which is ever so discreet in the main narrative by placing her on the gendered pedestal of iconoclasm. Throughout the fictional milieu of *Yajnaseni*, we find the character in the first-person narrative infuriated with the issues of gender that were never really addressed to the core.

Keywords: Draupadi; Dissent; Epic; Gender concerns; Gynocentric Narrative; Modern Adaptations of Epic; Myth.

Introduction

Princess Draupadi is exquisitely depicted in the great saga of Mahabharata as a woman of great courage and sacrifice. She is regarded as the exemplar of virtue, honesty, truthfulness and unwavering obedience. Born out of a yajna or sacrificial ritual performed by King Dhruvad, to avenge the

wounds of insult inflicted on him by his long-time friend- Drona, Draupadi is no ordinary woman. Having had no childhood, she did not grow up to be spectacular. She was born spectacular and custom designed with a sense of purpose and destiny. Breathtakingly beautiful and brilliant, she was dubbed the preserver of Dharma by the celestial bodies during her incarnation from the sacrificial fire. As a matter of fact, there have been very few women in the renderings of Indian epics to be regarded highly for their intellect and skill. Draupadi is not just a passive character in the epic; she is often consulted for advice and her strategic acumen is acknowledged by the Pandavas on many occasions. Her role as an advisor to Yudhishtira in the Rajasuya Yajna showcases her political insight and cleverness. The list of "Panchanaris" idealizing the five most righteous women in Indian mythology would be incomplete without Draupadi's name in it. In some versions of the Mahabharata, Draupadi is granted entry into heaven during her final symbolic spiritual journey. Her journey to the afterlife is not commonly depicted and the reasons for her celestial ascent remain open to interpretation.

In recent years, Draupadi, the enigmatic character from the Mahabharata, has undergone profound transformations in modern reinterpretations. Contemporary writers, artists and filmmakers have seized upon her narrative, offering fresh perspectives that challenge traditional portrayals and, in one too many instances elevated Draupadi into a symbol of feminist empowerment. Writers draw parallels between Draupadi's struggles and the challenges faced by women in today's world, transforming her into a beacon of inspiration and a rallying point for discussions on gender equality.

In *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*, Ray seems to re-image the prototypical Draupadi that patriarchy has promoted for the furtherance of male hegemony. This retelling of the Mahabharata, from the perspective of Draupadi, insinuates the themes of dissent and resistance. Such a shift reframes Draupadi as an active participant in her destiny, steering away from the passive victimhood associated with her in the classical texts. With the faculties of critical thinking and questioning she progressively becomes the blueprint of gynocriticism prevalent in the literary panorama since the 1920s marking a whole new concept of women's writing. The term "gynocriticism" was coined by Elaine Showalter, from the French term *la gynocritique* in *Towards a Feminist Poetics to analyse literature "with woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women"* because "no term exists in English for such a specialized discourse" (Showalter 216)

This gynocritical perspective is driven and facilitated by a conspicuous subversion of deep-rooted patriarchal values long since recognized in the Indian society and culture. As argued by Showalter, Gynocritics should stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition and focus on the world of female culture (217). Thus, the iconic manuscript of Ray inadvertently becomes the sign of emancipation as the protagonist develops into the signifier as well as the signified, reshaping the contours of gender dynamics prevalent in ancient India. Her questioning of the dharma that binds her to five husbands and a life of sacrifice becomes a powerful act of existential feminism, reflecting her deep frustration with a social order that denies her individuality. The nuanced portrayal serves as a counter-narrative to patriarchal constructs, as Ray probes into Draupadi's psyche to expose her as a woman aware of her symbolic weight, displaying her stout sense of agency in the process.

Ray's unique depiction of Draupadi's character

Pratibha Ray's depiction of Draupadi's misfortunes comes about with a contemporary relevance. Gender issues in varied forms that modern women experience today, threatening their very existence can be likened to the predicament of women in scriptures regardless of their class or status. She lays bare the bones of a society that took pleasure and pride in the objectification of women. The novelist presents her as an unnaturally strong woman of royal descent who repudiates the patriarchal standards of her time which other women observed unquestioningly. "Pratibha Ray has made Yajnaseni the epitome of a feminist" (Sharma 223). Ray's Draupadi raises the voice of gynocritical defiance, peeling back the layers of her lived experiences to confront a world that thrives on the subjugation of women.

Draupadi is as strong-willed as she is independent and more often than not, we see her challenging the status quo, fearlessly questioning the actions of those around her, including her five husbands and many other men associated with her life. We hardly find her as a totally submissive or subservient person because she never once retreats from her voice of reason or conscience. She has no qualms in speaking her mind out or standing upright for what she believes in. Her resistance to being reduced to a mere object or role exposes the absurdities of her existence, while her determination to live authentically exemplifies the "pursuit of freedom" central to existentialist thought. In the words of Beauvoir, "When a woman begins to doubt men's superiority, their pretensions serve only to decrease her esteem for them" (824)

Another liberating aspect of Ray's presentation is the honesty with which she has developed the character of Draupadi. She has done a fine job in rationalizing a woman with all her positive and negative traits. A mysterious personality is successfully transformed into a real person with credible existence. This autobiographic measure reinforces the importance of Draupadi as a valid concept and character even in the modern times. So, it is only natural that we get to see Yajnaseni asserting that her story is "nothing other than the life story of any human being on this mortal world." (Ray 4).

The dramatic narration of Yajnaseni captures the attention of readers in an instant. She decides to finally speak up and vent the inner conflicts during her final hours at the foot of the Himalayas. The novel opens up in the form of a letter directed to Sri Krishna, her most beloved Sakha, who was always attentive to her and with whom she shared a delightful relationship. Her letter reflects an existential reckoning—a deeply personal inquiry into whether her sacrifices and struggles ever truly served a purpose beyond upholding oppressive structures. With a new-found prowess, she ruminates on the sufferings she had to undergo as a woman in the name of dharma and questions the justification of it all. She is in a way investigating the political correctness of the male-dominated world that perpetuates discrimination and subordination in the name of gender. Draupadi's uniqueness lies in her ability to move across the complexities of her circumstances while retaining her agency. She is not merely a pawn in the power struggles of warrior men, but a shaper of destinies in her own right. Ray skilfully amplifies Draupadi's voice, allowing her to articulate her thoughts, desires and frustrations. This departure from the traditional narrative gives Draupadi a distinct identity, elevating her from a peripheral character to a central force in the epic saga. She eventually morphs into a phoenix rising from the ashes of perpetual shame of being an object to a cumulative subject, deconstructing the patriarchal theme of the Mahabharata, embodying a distinctly gynocritical narrative.

The Broad Implications of Women's Roles in Mythology and History

Ray casts before us a Draupadi who laments on the biased nature of dharma that by no means considers a woman's plight worthy of heaven. The trials and tribulations of her life are obligations; not sacrifice. Despite her unwavering adherence to dharma, she loses her footing at the Himalayas on the journey to heavenly abode. The neglectful statement of her ever-virtuous husband, Yudhishtira to Bhima to not look back, batters her completely. The woman who had five incomparable men as husbands

is all alone now. None of them even bothered to give her one last look. She then broken-heartedly but boldly goes forth to strip bare the falsity of their relationship with her-

“...how false is this bond between husband and wife! Affection, love, sacrifice and surrender! If man suffers the consequences of his own deeds, then offering myself at the feet of five husbands for the sake of preserving Yudhishtir’s dharma, why did I have to bear the burden of the whole world’s mockery, sneers, innuendos, abuse, scorn and slander?” (Ray 3)

A new Draupadi with fresh blood and vigour is born here. She can now clearly see all that she had previously been blind to. She enumerates the countless insults tossed at her as if she was the perpetrator and all those were hers alone to deal with. After all, she was the one born to preserve dharma, and to transgress from the grand purpose of her birth by choosing not to tolerate all the unfathomable humiliation was not within her. Her father had devised her Swayamvara as a plot for his revenge. Despite harbouring feelings for Krishna, she compromised on her individual desires for the greater good of her “father’s honour” accepting it as a filial obligation. “Nothing had happened with her as she desired” (Thakor). She might have come from a ritual fire but she lived the life of a human being and not of a celestial creature. The episode of Swayamvara showcased the grim realities of the objectification of women during her times.

Draupadi, in spite of being a princess was displayed like a commodity intended to be given away as a prize to the winner of the competitive events. She was forced to bite down the lustful gazes of all the assembled suitors until the very end. After her Swayamvara, she was divided like a delicacy among her five husbands despite being married to only one. The speechlessness that refrained her from emphasizing her integrity upon the question of her forced marriage with the other four Pandavas, to “protect” the dharma that silver-lined a mother’s word was also no different from the other obligations expected of her as a woman. But that proposition did nothing to ease her humiliation as a newly wedded woman. The onus of sacrifice and unquestioning commitment always befell women. Women were regarded as “play things by their husbands”, observes Nanda (88). That is how patriarchy proposed it. How can Draupadi- glorified as the epitome of eternal submission withdraw from it? Draupadi’s struggle mirrors the broader existential crisis of women throughout history, forced to reconcile their humanity with the roles imposed upon them.

Literature serves like a mirror of the times of its creation. Even the Ma-

habharata reminds us of the same. The fixation for male children has been on the run in the Indian culture since time immemorial. Women were considered as transferable properties for social and political accomplishments. Their rights were exclusively owned by the father and later by the husband. Women were bereft of self-assertion. An assertive woman was a threat to the society and disgrace to her family. Power and autonomy were masculine attributes. To be feminine was suggestive of weakness and submissiveness. Draupadi herself was a complimentary gift for king Dhruvad as his yajna was originally performed to beget a boy to avenge his episode of insult. Draupadi was not asked for and had come uninvited- like the many girls born in Indian families even in the modern times. Ray's Yajnaseni effectively sees through the pretence and disgusted beyond tolerance blurts out in anger-

"Was woman merely man's movable or immovable property? Was I part of Yudhistir's movable or immovable property, male and female slaves, horses and elephants? Being a woman did I not have right even over myself, my own self? If they had rights over this body of mine, did it mean they could do as they wished with me?" (Ray 235)

Exclusive feminine adjectives like kanya, pativrata and vidva in the epic and our culture at large present us with new grounds for contemplation. So does the much-discussed concept of virginity. The woman who was forced to live with five men was "blessed" with the boon of virginity every time a fresh nuptial cycle began. "Dreaded or desired or even demanded by the male, virginity is the highest form of the feminine mystery" (Beauvoir 206). Stringent beauty standards are imposed on girls [even now] contributing to feelings of insecurity and objectification. This societal pressure, as argued by Beauvoir, can lead to the internalization of self-criticism and significant emotional distress.

Ray's writing serves as a disclosure of the how men manipulated women by pinning them down with the burden of tradition when they were literally soaring free and relaxed, indulging in whatever fancy they found stimulating. Yajnaseni ponders deep on the system that permitted her husbands to marry and remarry filling up the harem with fertile women while she was biting down hard on the social stigma of living in a polyandrous relationship. She was disrespected in several occasions as being unchaste owing to her marriage to five men. The concept of virginity exclusively attributed to women seems like a laughable paradox in the absolute absence of its masculine counterpart. Nevertheless, Draupadi nurtured good relations with her co-wives and never once stooped down from her

duties as the first wife. She also strived her best to keep the brotherhood and unity among her five husbands intact, all the more so at the expense of her integrity. As always, no one blamed the man but the woman. She desperately tries to console her heart by assuming the matrimonial motives of her husbands to be purely political. In the societies of ancient India as depicted in the Mahabharata, gender roles were rigidly defined and women were often relegated to subordinate positions. Draupadi, however, stands as a transgressor as a woman who refuses to conform to the traditional stereotypes assigned to her exclusively on the premises of gender. Daschaudhuri opines that she is “a woman wronged by her husbands, her elders and yet she is not silent.” (178). Ray’s Draupadi is not a passive victim but an active agent in her destiny, challenging the established norms with a formidable spirit. The author delves into Draupadi’s internal world, portraying her as a woman of intellect, courage and unyielding determination. She confronts her “alienation” through a radical self-awareness of her existence.

Strength beyond Stoicism

Draupadi’s greatest humiliation occurs in the Kuru Sabha, where she is publicly disrobed in the midst of a court of erudite men. Draupadi, the crest jewel of strength and resilience derails into moments of vulnerability and despair. She is ruthlessly subjected to indescribable forms of violence and abuse escalating to the extremes of public physical and sexual assault. Yudhistir loses the dice game and Duryodhana orders his younger brother, Dushasan to bring her to court. Regardless of her scantily clad state, Dushasan physically and emotionally assaults a menstruating Draupadi by dragging her into the court by her luxuriant hair. The majestic queen of five kings is treated as a mere pawn in the struggle for power and politics, tossed across the court like a sparsely clad ragdoll. No one, including the much-revered elders dare to comment on this barbaric act. She even puts up with the spiteful remarks of lust and insult hurled at her. We find her furiously questioning and exploding at the so-called dharma that permitted such atrocities towards women. She beseeches king Dh-rutharashtra to protect her dignity according to dharma. In the absence of a favourable move, she boldly questions the authority of a husband who has pledged himself to stake his wife. She loses it completely when Bhishma replies that a woman is an absolute dependant on her husband, no matter what he has gone through. The refusal of the court to intervene highlights the existential feminist premise that women must carve out their freedom amidst societal structures that reduce them to objects. The obsolete Indian belief of “marital ownership” may be counted as the root-

cause of the [progressive] existential feminist concept that marital freedom is primary for a woman to exercise or even contemplate any other notion of freedom. This grand episode has later been exalted and praised by many as one of the most exhilarating in the whole storyline of the Mahabharata.

Sakuni, the master-schemer of the dice game, adds insult to injury by emphasizing how detrimental is education to women and ridicules her by suggesting that she ask for forgiveness from Duryodhana to escape the predicament. She is wounded beyond repair and moves on to take a vow to keep her hair untied until it is smeared with Dushasan's blood as a mark of revenge which would later be realized in due course of the great battle. This vow serves as a powerful symbol of her resilience against injustice. Yet, quite paradoxically, she was blamed by many to be the perpetrator of the great Kurukshetra battle that had originally stemmed out of the conflicts for power between Pandavas and Kauravas ever since their childhood. She theoretically played no part in the incidents that took place much before her advent into their lives. "Woman's drama lies in this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, which always posits itself as essential, and the demands of a situation that constitutes her as inessential" claims Beauvoir (37). The other characters in Yajnaseni perceive Draupadi through various lenses, reflecting the diversity of reactions to her unconventional stance. Some view her with awe and admiration, recognizing the strength in her defiance. Others, bound by traditional ideologies, perceive her as a threat to the established order and attempt to diminish her significance. Draupadi's interactions with characters such as Kunti, Yudhishthira and even Krishna, reveal the complexities of societal expectations and the varying responses to a woman's non-conformity.

Being a woman, she was always frowned upon for her superior sense of justice and righteousness. Consequently, she came to be wrongly construed as a woman seething with revenge and not as one who had been irrevocably aggrieved. Draupadi's strength as a transgressor is manifest in her refusal to be defined solely by her roles as a wife to the Pandavas. She resists the constraints of societal expectations and asserts her individuality and pursuit of freedom. Ray's Draupadi is vocal, opinionated and unafraid to express her desires, challenging the patriarchy that seeks to suppress her voice. In her unique manner, she becomes a symbol of resistance against the injustices and biases embedded in the epic narrative. Draupadi in the Mahābhārata posits her as a "pandita", a female scholar who contributes to the examination of dharma (Black).

A Timeless Icon of Gender Equality

Draupadi illustrates a preeminent role in the novel. We find her to be strong and supple at the same time. She is selfless, submissive to a great extent, respectful, deeply loving and caring. She never hesitates to give up all the luxuries to follow her husbands into the forest as a dutiful wife and unfalteringly remains hungry until the end of every day to have her first meal, when there would be no more visitors for her husbands. She is not embarrassed about her sexuality and never once flinches from it. She resents the dharma that overlooks the plight of women and squarely goes about it. She wants all the men who illtreat women to receive punishment for their sins as the future of Bharata's women will be at stake if otherwise. This unique outlook on life enables her to empathise with other women, even her rivals and befriend them without prejudice or grudge. Her compassionate and highly supportive nature is clearly evident in her interactions with other women in the story. When Haritha, Drona's wife asks for her forgiveness, Yajnaseni replies modestly that she finds herself in no authoritative position to "forgive" Guru Drona-

"... sakhi, who am I to forgive guru Drona? I am just woman. In the eyes of scholars and wise men a woman has no status of her own. Honour and insult, character, nobility etc. — nothing is hers. This has been proved by my insult in the Kuru court." (Ray 258-259).

She understands perfectly the pitiful tones of Haritha's hollow life as a wife and honestly acknowledges her qualities as a compassionate sister. Likewise, she bears no enmity to the other brides of her husbands and treats them in a good manner. She in a way considerate to her mother-in-law as well for being ridiculed by the callous society for giving birth to kids not sired by Pandu. Draupadi reflects an understanding of the interconnectedness of women's suffering, resonating deeply with the gynocritical focus on female relationships. Some historians and scholars argue that Draupadi, while undoubtedly revering Sita Devi, may not have entirely condoned her unquestioning acceptance of patriarchal norms and the injustices she endured. Unlike Sita she is not quite ready to suffer all that comes her way and disperse the scene of trauma and humiliation without a debate. "Many women have long chafed against Sita as a model of feminine virtue" (Erney). Yajnaseni, the first feminist of Dvaparayug stands up for herself and would not go down without a fight. Draupadi's distinctiveness is not merely in her defiance but also in her resilience in the face of adversity. Her strength is not portrayed as a stoic acceptance of fate but as an active resistance to injustice. Ray's Draupadi, while grounded in the

cultural and historical context of the Mahabharata, transcends the limitations of her time, becoming a symbol of liberation for modern readers.

Relevance of Ray's Neo-interpretation of Draupadi

"The task of feminist critics is to find a new language, a new way of reading that can integrate our intelligence and our experience, our reason and our suffering, our scepticism and our vision." (Showalter 219). Interpretations of Draupadi in modern times transcend the confines of ancient epics, offering a powerful reflection of the persistent struggles faced by women in a world still entangled in the webs of patriarchal norms. "There is a sense of female solidarity seen in the novel." (A confessing book). Draupadi, once confined to the pages of an ancient epic, now strides into the present as a symbol of insubordination. Her narrative is retold, not merely as a tragic heroine, but as a mirror reflecting the myriad facets of gender discrimination that persist in the current socio-cultural prospects. The relevance of these reinterpretations lies in their ability to strip away the veneer of antiquity, exposing Draupadi as a woman unapologetically grappling with issues that resonate with contemporary audiences.

The fine lines of her character echo the silent battles fought by women against societal attitudes, discrimination in the workplace and the pervasive undercurrents of misogyny. In Ray's neo-interpretation, Draupadi's voice, once muffled by the weight of tradition, reverberates with a resonance that transcends time. She becomes a symbol of empowerment, a tribute to the strength that arises when women confront and challenge systemic biases. It serves as an existential call to action, challenging individuals to question and dismantle ingrained gender norms. Draupadi becomes the voice of countless women whose stories have been suppressed or sidelined, demanding recognition and redressal for the injustices they endure. Furthermore, these reinterpretations function as a narrative bridge between the ancient and the contemporary, emphasizing the cyclical nature of societal challenges. Draupadi's struggles transcend temporal boundaries, revealing the unsettling continuity of gender discrimination across epochs. In this continuity, these reinterpretations act as a kinetic force, disrupting the complacency that often accompanies the acceptance of gender disparities. In the modern era, where conversations about gender equality are gaining momentum, Draupadi emerges as a literary warrior, armed not with physical weapons but with the potent quill of reinterpretation. Her story becomes a gynocritic tool for dismantling stereotypes, a narrative sledgehammer that shatters the glass ceilings limiting the aspirations of women.

Conclusion

Ray's writing thus becomes a passage of liberation and recovery for Draupadi. Her instances of outrageousness and insubordination develop into celebrated sagas of her journey from being an object in the periphery to the subject in the center. The story offers ample insight into the complexities of her enigmatic personality. She detaches herself from the coordinates of subservient life prescribed by the abusive society and sets out to explore the deeper aspects of feminine personality, reassigning it with new values. Motswapong says "Through subversion she becomes that which resists 'counter' male knowledge, power and glory." (482). She self-assigns the role of the spokesperson of female justice and illustrates the conflict of tradition, myth, culture and modernity most cogently.

It comes as a shock to see that the women, who have always been glorified as the preservers of the ancient Indian culture, in fact, had no relevant part in its enterprise other than as puppets in the hands of its gamblers. Ray's splendid character opens up a new avenue to explore the life, desires, passions and frustrations of many such marginalized women of the bygone era. Her life effectively demonstrates a subversion of patriarchal principles by relocating the focal point from the much-popularized androcentric extravaganza to the inner spaces of issues pertaining to the muted gender.

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