

**Mythic Re-vision of Prathibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of
Draupadi***

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Abstract

Indian sensibility is intrinsically shaped as well as nourished by religion and mythology. *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the preservers of tradition and spirituality are paradoxically the carriers of transformations which have transgressed the rigid boundaries of culture and conventional ideology. The story of Mahabharata has been told, retold, interpreted and reinterpreted a number of times by the authors of distinct backgrounds to enlighten the naive individuals of their generation. For centuries, female identity in the Indian context has found representation through religion and mythology. The mythic stereotypes are so deeply engrossed in the Indian subconscious that they do not only serve as definitions, but the meaning of existence, especially in case of women.

Women writers have contributed immensely to the field of Indian English literature. The study and re-vision of myths prevalent in the Indian society and literature has been a subject of keen interest for these writers. Since the time immemorial, Indian women have been assigned with the task of conserving tradition, and it is considered as a prerogative by them. The conflict of tradition and modernity which has provided an apparatus through which Indian women endeavour to characterise themselves, also could be termed as the axis around which is yoked the constant comparisons and contrasts of the contemporary women with their traditional mythic counterparts. Prathibha Ray's novel, *Yajnaseni: The story of Draupadi* is no

exception in this regard. It could be considered as an attempt on the part of the writer to deconstruct the great epic of *Mahabharata*, giving the mouthpiece to the protagonist, Draupadi. This research paper proposes to evaluate on the theme of mythic re-vision of the novel, *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* by Prathibha Ray. Draupadi is the mythic figure which has been the metaphor of suffering, endurance and sacrifice. However, Ray has given her the chance to redefine her identity not only for herself, but for the millions of Indian women who are subjected to integration with her in the name of valorisation, which has subversive connotation attached to it.

Key Words: Re-vision, myths, identity, gender, religion, contemporary, tradition

Indian sensibility is intrinsically shaped as well as nourished by religion and mythology. *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the preservers of tradition and spirituality are paradoxically the carriers of transformations which have transgressed the rigid boundaries of culture and conventional ideology. The story of *Mahabharata* has been told, retold, interpreted and reinterpreted a number of times by the authors of distinct backgrounds to enlighten the naive individuals of their generation. The mythic stereotypes are so deeply engrossed in the Indian subconscious that they do not only serve as definitions, but the meaning of existence, especially in case of women. For centuries, female identity in the Indian context has found representation through religion and mythology.

Women writers have contributed immensely to the field of Indian English literature. The study and re-vision of myths prevalent in the Indian society and literature has been a subject of keen interest for these writers. Since the time immemorial, Indian women have been assigned with the task of conserving tradition, and it is considered as a prerogative by them. The conflict of tradition and modernity which has provided an apparatus through which Indian women endeavour to characterise themselves, also could be termed as the axis around which is yoked the constant comparisons and contrasts of the contemporary women with their traditional mythic counterparts. Prathibha Ray's novel, *Yajnaseni: The story of Draupadi* is no exception in this regard. It could be considered as an attempt on the part of the writer to deconstruct the great epic of *Mahabharata*, giving the mouthpiece to the protagonist, Draupadi. *Mahabharata*, with its multiple characters endows the readers with different perspectives to comprehend their lives in accordance to the teachings of the great epic. The multiple layers in which the epic is folded have at least one strand to assimilate one's personality. Amongst these portrayals, the character of Draupadi occupies the central stage. She has always been the embodiment of sacrifice and suffering who has set standards of comparison for the contemporary women. She is the dynamic character who finds improvisation in each successive version of which she is a part. Every new version opens new facets of her personality.

Feminism and Post Modernism have forced the people to understand as well as redefine the considerations which bound the life and literature with the shackles of conventions, tradition and redundant prejudices. It has facilitated the need to discover and assert one's own self. This theme has been dealt in a judicious manner in the works of the women fiction writers. They have found the need to re-vision the older texts in the light of existing phenomenon. Re-vision

is the task of reconstructing new history and granting a fresh perspective to past. It not only proffers a new understanding but a novel creation to the domain of tradition. Here, the observations of Linda Hutcheon on re-vision of past could be taken into consideration, By recalling the texts of the past . . . of literature or even of history . . . postmodern novels similarly use parody to question whether there can ever be such a thing as a final definitive “inscription” of selfhood or subjectivity in fiction” (8).

Myth is fictitious belief of the people in a popular conduct. People are reluctant to defy them because it is deeply rooted in religion and culture. Indian mentality still gives space to age old customs and beliefs. Mythology is subjected to connotations and denotations since the inception of its incorporation in the mainstream. Marina Warner narrates:

Myths offer a lens which can be used to see human identity in its social and cultural context . . . they can lock us up in stock reactions, bigotry and fear, but they are not immutable, and by unpicking them, the stories can lead to others. Myths convey values and expectations which are always evolving, in the process of being formed, but . . . and this is fortunate . . . never set so hard they cannot be changed again. (14)

Myth is the speculative outcome of past ingrained in the circumscribed mindset. However, the onset of alteration in the human outlook owing to the changing socio-cultural milieu resultant of globalisation has added new dimensions to the implications adhered to mythic ideology. In contrast to the interpretations it had been contended to in its nascent stage, myths are being employed in the current scenario to build the present and telescope the future. Though their roles as the protectors of traditional canon could not be undermined, however they are seen in the new light by the aware individuals who covet to bring them in the forefront to contest as well as redefine the prevalent norms to which, especially the marginalised are subjected to in the vague of preservation of their individuality.

Prathibha Ray’s novel *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* finds its foundation in the year 1984. This year comes under the realm of an era predominately dedicated to the repercussions of the aftermath of the colonial rule. This time frame includes not only restoration of traditional norms but also a reassessment of conventional beliefs in terms of redefining certain roles and equations. The man-woman equation was the one to be mainly analyzed in the context of changing scenario. This novel by Prathibha Ray endeavours to cover the early developments in this movement dedicated to relocation of the position of women in Indian

society keeping pace with the intricate profundity which the impact of institution has on their personality. The author presents the protagonist Draupadi enveloped in the characteristics conferred to her by Ved Vyas but with novel dimensions to which the audience of the recipient generation could relate with.

Ray leaving forth the Great War which took place in Kurushetra, which has been repeatedly dealt in the preceding versions, resorted to probe the inner life of Draupadi which according to her is worth an exploration. Though she has added new features to the personality of this multidimensional character nonetheless has maintained the authenticity while re-visioning her persona. The inner voice of Draupadi which is silenced in the Vyasa's *Mahabharata* finds a vent through Ray's version, where she is an assertive narrator who is aware of her condition and discerns the facts hidden underneath the apparent reality. For Ray, Draupadi is a mythic character but has relevance as the embodiment of a real woman who has to undergo suffering accompanied by complicated choices on the moral front. Her decisions and choices fabricate the delicate threads to shape the destiny of the great Kuru Empire. The novel portrays the end of the life cycle of Draupadi or rather Yajnaseni of Ray with a discourse in which she engages with Lord Krishna. Here she not only longs to unearth the reason for her choices but demands an understanding from others who are the audience of her extraordinary tale.

Although other characters who occupy an important space in *Mahabharata* appear in Ray's version but are on the margins, and it is Draupadi, with her conflicts and assertions which occupy the centre stage. She is given the authority to interpret the events which are interwoven in the story of the great dynasty. She endows the audience with the poignant journey which she undertakes from being the daughter of King Drupada, to the wife of five noble men. She reflects on the challenges and sacrifices she has to undertake, and voices the audacity required on her part being the wife of five men, remaining faithful and justifiable to each one of them. The life of Yajnaseni could be rightfully termed as the saga of an indomitable spirit. Her marriage to five men puts her in a state of a quandary. Moreover, she is disrobed by her own kinsmen in the public hall. She questions herself in the process of sacrifices she makes that what she has received in return for preserving the dignity of others. She had expected that her five husbands would save her from being disrobed. But the irony of the situation is that it is Yudhishtir, her husband who stakes her in the game and is a mute spectator along with the other four to her affliction. The indescribable distress which she has undergone is very difficult to comprehend in the original version and it is this exploitation which her body and soul underwent finds

portrayal through Yajnaseni of Ray. Here the words of Yajnaseni, who ponders on her life, could be referred to, “then my life, the life of one born of this spark created by the friction of wood and fire — how could that be complete without conflicts” (Ray 47).

In the Vyasa’s version, Draupadi has no identity of her own. She is rendered an existence in terms of others. She is someone’s daughter, wife and daughter-in-law. However, in Ray’s version she is granted the freedom of thought and opinion. Though her fate remains parallel with the original version but she does not merely remains convicted in the prescribed roles and makes her stand as the queen who wants to change the destiny of the proceeding generations of women. She yearns to shrug off the soil that is hurled on her to spoil her respect as a woman. Her heart rendering proclamation echoes the inner darkness of her heart which she desires to enlighten by earning justice for herself and her sacrifices:

The story of my life, is nothing other than the life-story of any human being on this mortal world . . . Seeing each hair-raising incident of my life the people of Kaliyuga will be able to decide whether the insults Draupadi suffered have ever been borne by any woman of any time. God forbid that in future anyone should ever suffer such abuse.
(Ray 4)

Though Ray has endeavoured through her tale to share the predicament of Draupadi, nevertheless her suffering never seems to end. It seems like a vast ocean which stretches itself beyond limits.

In the novel, Prathibha Ray has made Yajnaseni the epitome of a feminist. She raises voice not only against the injustice done to her but also stands against the predispositions to which the women in general are adhered to. She raises the questions against the subjugation of women in the hands of patriarchal powers. Here, the following words by Simon de Beauvoir could be quoted, “Women have gained only what men have been willing to grant” (19). Along with the concern for women, she further expands her horizon and stands for the indiscrimination faced by the whole society in the name of: rich and poor, Brahmins and Chandals and other distinctions based on virtue and vice. She wishes to bring equilibrium in the society and wants to put an end to these prejudices which render humans the debased status in the society. In this way Ray’s Yajnaseni raises herself above her own emotional stigma and finds the answer to her dilemma in the contentment and harmony of the society.

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