

ARTICULATING SILENCE: EXPLORING PRATHIBHA RAY'S YAJNASENI  
WITH A FEMINIST LENS

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**Abstract**

*The role of women in Indian mythology forms an interesting study providing insight into the strengths and weaknesses of their characters. The Mahabharata is an epic involving politics, sacrifices and attainment of dharma, family values and war. But the adversities the female characters, especially Draupadi, face grow to be the main reason for the war against good and evil. Like Draupadi there have been many women who have come out as powerful characters in Hindu mythology. The status of woman in myth making is very significant, and 'Draupadi' has become the flaming symbol of protest invoked by feminists and other social activists' today. This paper deals with the character of Draupadi depicted in the modern retelling of The Mahabharata by Pratibha Ray- Yajnaseni.*

**Keywords:** myth; gynocritics; upliftment; stereotypes; power; protest

“Mythology is a subjective truth. Every culture imagines life in a certain way.”

-DevduttaPattanaik

During the early twentieth century, the sad plight of women in the society, their unrelieved sufferings, their damaged dignities and their bondage to their household came to be acknowledged. Although not many actions were taken to help in improving the condition of women but at the least, they were being recognized. During this time many reinterpretations of *The Mahabharata* were published, especially in regional languages. Although the dramatic events in these plays and novels revolved around the character of Draupadi but these works did not glorify the character of the female protagonist rather these works magnified the heroism of the male characters such as Bheema, Arjuna, Karna among others. One major reason for this treatment of Draupadi's character might have been the then plight of women, who were being addressed but their social status wasn't being improved. Thus, playwrights and novelists wrote about Draupadi but they did not reckon her as the heroic character that

she was. The character portrayal of Draupadi is in compliance to the status of woman during that time. As a result, Draupadi, the most important female character of the biggest epic in the world, remains shadowed in the literature of the early twentieth century.

The surge of women writers in later half of the twentieth century helped the cause of women. The women now broke the shackles and came forward. The feminist movement must be given a lot of credit for the advancement of women. Feminist writers and critics such Simone de Beauvoir, Helene Cixous, Kate Millett, Julia Kristeva, Mahadevi Varma, Mahasweta Devi, Bharati Mukherjee, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das and others have been examples to the female writers to come forth and write their own literature. The American feminist Elaine Showalter, one of the founding members of feminist literary criticism in the United States of America, conceptualized 'gynocriticism', a school of feminist criticism concerned with "woman as writer". Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) traces a female literary tradition in the English novel from the Bronte sisters to Doris Lessing which demonstrates that the advancement of this tradition is similar to the growth of any literary subculture. Her book is perhaps the most influential of the accounts of women's writings. She identifies a female subculture in which fiction by women constitutes a record of their experience. She defines three phases of feminism: 'feminine phase', 'feminist phase' and 'female phase'. Laying emphasis on 'gynocriticism', Showalter writes, "Gynocriticism begins at the point where we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture." (Showalter 131)

Theories of such feminist critics gave hope to the suppressed women who then started fighting their way and established women's writing. In India, the past lives in the societies, it serves our contemporary needs and continually shapes and structures our present and future. Since ages, people have accepted the traditions and followed it blindly without questioning its rationality and relevance in contemporary society. The norms set by the myths, traditions and folklores have become absolute. Thus, the people from the margins suffer the most as they were not allowed to put forth their lives' circumstances to words unlike the upper-caste male Brahmins. Therefore, another question rises that why do we still blindly adhere to the words written in the epics which were penned down by upper-caste Brahmins like Veda Vyasa and Valmiki? Especially now, when we live in democratic nation where every individual has the right to equality. It would be fair to say that India gained its independence in 1947 but this independence was limited to the people in the superstructure and did not reach to those on the base/margins.

Fortunately, the women were able to fight for themselves and started writing about their social conditions. Many started writing in their vernacular and their works were then translated into various other languages. In this manner women became active in the literary sphere and their works started being acknowledged. The early Indian women writers who helped shape women's writing were: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain also known as Begum

Rokeya, Cornelia Sorabji, Sarojini Naidu, Mahadevi Varma, Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, Krishna Sobti, Gaura Pant or Shivani. These are some of the more popular names among the early Indian female writers who were of major influence to the contemporary female writers such as Anita Desai, Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and others.

The equation of gender roles has been totally in favour of the males and in such conditions the budding of these eminent women writers is nothing less than remarkable. The epics and the mythologies have been written to champion the cause of male superiority where women have been suppressed and succumbed to nothingness in comparison to the males. Yet, we find women like Meerabai who became examples to the other women in the society. The followers of the Bhakti Movement fail to comprehend the rebellious spirituality imbued in Meerabai's writings. The contemporary women writers have also rebelled against the androcentric writings. Males use mythologies to part examples of the way of living to the females. Nowadays, women have rejected these myths and reconstructed them pointing out the injustices caused to them since time immemorial. The characters of Sita and Draupadi have been among the favourites which the women writers have chosen to portray in their works in order to pose a question to the dominating nature of the patriarchal society.

*Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* is a novel by the Oriya writer, Pratibha Ray. Through this novel, Pratibha Ray has tried to bring forth the deeper aspects of Draupadi's mind. It is an attempt by the writer to deconstruct the great epic of *The Mahabharata* by giving the voice to the protagonist of the novel, Draupadi. There is a unique quality of Indian myths. These myths originate from the womb of mainstream mythology which has been prevalent through ages in India yet the different subcultures tell a deviating tale of the same myth. This is very apt when we talk about *The Mahabharata*. The literature in Orissa flourished in the second half of the nineteenth century which is also known as the Pre-modern age in Oriya literature. In this age the writers copied from the Western traditions and there was an imaginative interplay of myth and archetypes. There have been a number of women writers in Oriya literature but most of them could not release themselves from the shackles of patriarchy. Among the few who were able to come out of the prison of patriarchy are: Mamata Dash, Pratibha Satpathy, Aparna Mohanty and Pratibha Ray.

*Yajnaseni* (1984) was originally written in Oriya and later translated into English by the eminent scholar of *The Mahabharata*, Pradip Bhattacharya. 'Yajnaseni' is a Sanskrit word which means born from the fire altar or 'yajna'. Born from the fire altar as a grown-up child, Draupadi was given the name Yajnaseni. Her father was called Yajnasena thus, in Draupadi's case, Yajnaseni not only defines her as born from the Yajna but also as the daughter of Yajnasena. Drupada's wife, Prishati feared that Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna would not feel the way towards her as their real mother. So, she prayed to the fire god 'Agni' to let the children forget that they were born from the Yajna. Her prayer was answered and her children Dhrishtadyumna and Draupadi, also came to be known as the children of Prishati, viz. Parshata and Parshati respectively.

Pratibha Ray weaves a story of the epic which is unheard of. Draupadi is the main character of the novel, and for change she is treated like the protagonist. Ray unravels the important instances that would have been a part of Draupadi's life. She gives the readers an in-depth view of Draupadi's life and death which not many other writers have tried to do. Through Draupadi's perspective, Ray not only gives us the insights of her life but the hidden feelings of the Pandava brothers, Kunti and other characters are also revealed. The characters are not treated as the mythological personae as in the original epic but as ordinary characters with humanly feelings and emotions. Draupadi herself is the narrator and the major portion of the story runs in analepsis. She tells the readers about the virtues and the vices of the characters including her and is seen as very rational character who is not only critical about others' indecisions blunders but is also judgemental of her vices. Pratibha Ray has tried to portray the psychological picture of Draupadi as a woman who undergoes several predicaments yet comes out strong. Irawati Karve remarks that,

The Draupadi of the *Mahabharata* stormed and raged; but to the last moment she remained a faithful wife. There is not a single incident in her life that casts the slightest suspicion on her life. [...] Her sensitive pride, her willingness to sacrifice and her faithfulness to her husbands were the qualities appropriate to her country, time and clan; she was extraordinary but this extraordinariness was born out of the ordinary values of her time. (Karve 95-97)

*Yajnaseni* is novel in which the protagonist, Krishnaa confesses her own credits and discredits. She analyses different issues of human relationship in a very subjective way. The novel opens with Krishnaa lying on Mount Meru, desolate and abandoned by her mighty husbands. She has written a letter to her 'Sakha' Krishna and the last word she writes is "Finis" which is symbolic of the end of her life as well which was full of sufferings and agonies. During this time Draupadi recalls the incidents of her life which she thinks she was not able to put down into words. And though her soul is about to leave her body, she is still worried about the way people are going to judge her chastity.

It is said that my name will be counted as one of the five 'satis', renowned for chastity. Men and women of Kaliyuga will laugh scornfully saying, "If with five husbands Draupadi could be a sati, then what is the need for fidelity to one husband?" With many husbands why can't the women of Kaliyuga be satis. Draupadi will be food for mockery and jest amid the perverted sexuality of Kaliyuga's debauched men and women. (Ray 3)

Through the narrative technique, Ray gives voice to Draupadi who was not able to vent her feelings but only suffered and retaliated and suffered again. Through this novel we become aware of the innermost feelings of Krishnaa. She was a chaste woman, loyal to her husbands and a faithful daughter. But through *Yajnaseni* Pratibha Ray questions that did she have the perfect husbands and a perfect father? A question mark is always put while talking about Draupadi's chastity and fidelity but Ray questions the faithfulness and commitment of the

Pandavas towards Draupadi. Krishnaa cherishes the love for Arjuna for he was the one who won her hand at the 'svayamvara'. But her love for Arjuna doesn't blind her eyes towards her duties. Rather she can trace the commendable traits of each of the Pandavas. She remains dutiful and tolerant and accepts Yudhishtira and admires his qualities. She is well aware that it is because of Yudhishtira that she was reckoned the queen of the kingdom.

In chapter 7 of the book, the Pandavas return from the 'Svayamvara Sabha'. A major dilemma surfaces when Yudhishtira tells Kunti that they have brought a "priceless thing". Kunti tells them, "whatever you have brought divide it amongst the five of you equally!" Draupadi could not understand but the brothers plunged into a deep reverie unaware of the consequences of their mother's words. Dharma is of utmost importance to the Pandavas, so important that 'Dharmaputra' Yudhishtira opines that "dharma based on truth and morality should be pursued even at the cost of one's own life". (Sharma 115) The Pandavas were all infatuated by the beauty of Draupadi and this confusion gave them the opportunity to marry Draupadi in the garb of safeguarding dharma. Krishnaa wasn't even consulted once while the biggest decision of her life was being taken by strangers she had met some time ago. She had accepted Arjuna as her husband but when he too spoke in favour of what was Yudhishtira's idea of dharma, she flared up, "I wished I could turn into a searing flame of the sacrificial fire and destroy the world and in it these five brothers too." (Ray 57) She was infuriated but she somehow calmed herself down because she had accepted Arjuna as her husband and tried to understand the dilemma which he must have been through. This is just a small example from the text of *Yajnaseni* which tells us about the sufferings and sacrifices of Draupadi.

Her relationship with Krishna Vasudeva and with Arjuna is complicated. She is the incarnation of Shri, the spouse of Lord Vishnu who is incarnated as Krishna Vasudeva in *The Mahabharata*. It is no wonder that Krishnaa and Krishna share unique relationship which is one of the most enchanting features of the epic. Ray has not curbed this feeling in her Draupadi but made it even more apparent in *Yajnaseni*. Arjuna and Krishna Vasudeva are close friends or each other's 'sakha', thus, Krishna is a well-wisher of Pandavas. Draupadi is mesmerized just by listening to the deeds of Krishna narrated by her 'sakhi' Nitambini. She indulges herself in fantasy and dreams about Krishna day and night, totally submerged in the vision of Krishna. This is her state of mind even before meeting Krishna. Krishna occupied her mind and her heart and she wrote poetry about him. Pratibha Ray portrays her Krishnaa as well-versed in poetry and well-read in scriptures which justifies her writing letter in beginning of the book. Being well-versed helps her to communicate with the shy Sahadeva. In some way or the other, she manages to keep the brothers united though she is the prized possession yet she never lets anyone of them feel neglected for too long. Krishna Vasudeva helps her from time to time and it is in the 'Vastraharan' episode that Krishna safeguards Krishnaa's honour.

The infamous 'Vastraharan' scene has been portrayed by many writers in the form of plays and poems mostly. Many contemporized versions of this episode have been made



available and one such example is Machhindra Kambli's play, *Vastraharan*. The way Pratibha Ray has recomposed and incorporated it in her play is does not cease to amaze the readers. The fact that it is the victimized protagonist who herself is narrating the incident gives the episode more pathos and makes it even more tragic. During menstrual periods women were confined to a private chamber (in some places this practise still prevails) which she could not leave until the menstruation was over. Draupadi was doing the same, in the name of abiding to the dharma. Her body was covered only by a single cloth. She was not allowed to do her hair, nor allowed to see her husbands' face. While this confinement to one might seem suffocating and subduing the woman's liberty, what happens next is nothing but a grievous sin for which there could be no penance. Duhshasan, one of the Kaurava brothers, comes in and drags the queen of Indraprastha by the hair into the palace assembly-hall. While all this happens, we are revealed to what all is going on in Draupadi's mind while this unforgivable incident takes place. Krishnaa is terrified, ashamed and burning with anger and at the same time cursing Duhshasan for dragging her to the palace in such a state. But she is aware of the cruelties the Kauravas could inflict on her so she prays to her 'sakha' Krishna to save her from this disgrace.

She is even more shocked when the elders and her husbands sit across the hall like muted beings. Through her stream of consciousness, we get to know how she exactly feels about the people in the assembly-hall:

In front of me were seated my heroes, my five kshatirya husbands, silent like offenders. Before their very eyes their wife was being insulted and they were sitting helpless, silent! At the other end were seated my father-in-law (blind, but surely was hearing my cries? He must be aware of my helplessness), grandfather Bhishma (wise, valorous, celibate since birth, he too was a silent spectator), Guru Drona, Kripacharya — all had become dumb." (Ray 237)

One by one, Krishnaa thinks about all the men and their past deeds which made the such revered personalities yet how weak they were now when her chastity was tried to be violated by the demonic figure of Duhshasan. What was the use of the titles of 'King' and 'Guru', where had the wisdom and valour gone when she had been subjected to being less than a slave? Krishnaa's mind was filled with such questions and yet she prayed to the one she believed would rescue her from this injustice and she prayed to Vasudeva while she questioned the heroics and dharma of the heroes present in the assembly-hall and the means through which the Kauravas won the game of dice against Yudhishtira. Nobody answers her questions except for Shakuni, the maternal-uncle of the Kauravas, who answers, "The greatest offence a woman commits is to try to be learned." He hints that in the assembly-hall full of men a woman is not supposed to raise her voice, let alone question the male authority/decision. He further says, "Just as knowledge and power enhance man's attraction, similarly ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman." (Ray 238) Through

these lines, Ray has depicted the condition of women and the authority the men claimed over the women.

No one listened to the cries of Krishnaa, she was helpless and when Bheema blamed Yudhishtira for playing the game of dice and losing everything and tried to fight for the honour of Draupadi, he was calmed down by Arjuna who took his elder brother, Yudhishtira's side while Draupadi was appalled that even the love of her life did not speak up to safeguard the chastity of his beloved wife. The regard for tradition and culture and for elders' respect was more vital to the Pandavas than the protection of a woman's honour. Ray gives the example of Sita and Ravana. When Sita was abducted an army of bears and monkeys fought to preserve her chastity but here Draupadi's own husband seemed to be bound by invisible shackles. Draupadi protests against a woman being treated as 'an object' or 'the other'.

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

Ray construes such impressive vision of Draupadi's subconscious mind which is in coherence to the incidents that take place. She has portrayed Draupadi as a woman with humanly traits. Thus, the feeling of terror, shame and anger are natural to any woman in such situation. Being a woman herself, Ray has portrayed not only what must have gone on in Krishnaa's mind but also what an ordinary woman would feel when in similar type of quandary. The novel follows the story of the original epic and ultimately Draupadi is covered by layers of cloth which Krishna has magically procured from his hands. Draupadi's chastity remains intact but in her the feeling of revenge develops.

One of the most symbolic characters in *Yajnaseni* is that of Maya. The word 'maya' is a Sanskrit word which in English means 'illusion'. In the novel Maya is introduced as the maid of Krishna, whom he presents to Draupadi as a token of their intimate friendship. Krishna says:

Since childhood she has been with me. She has always taken full note of my needs. She loves me so much that she cannot tolerate anyone else serving me. In case anyone bothers me, she is ever alert by my side. But, whoever stations her in his heart, she envelopes him with her love to such an extent that nothing else is visible to him. This maid of mine, Maya, is as much the cause of grief as the remover of it." (Ray 89)

Maya is the personified figure of illusion and as the plot moves forward this illusion of Draupadi takes the form of pride which she gets rid of only towards the end of the novel. It is interesting though that Krishna was the one who endowed Draupadi with such possession, pride and illusion. If we consider the contemporary relevance of the text, the role of Maya becomes even more compelling. In the ancient time pride was considered a sin. But

psychology has classified it into two broad categories: positive pride and negative pride. In layman's language, if the pride becomes the dominating emotion then it can be considered as negative pride but as long as the pride gives a productive self-evaluation it is positive and harmless.

In the novel, Maya plays a supportive role to Draupadi with her friendly advices but at times Draupadi gets annoyed with her and ends up arguing as well. Pride is also an important character trait of Draupadi, it helps her retaliate and question the authority of the males. In the beginning, she is a proud princess of the kingdom of Panchala and later the proud queen of Indraprastha and with that the proud wife of the mighty brothers, the Pandavas. And though her pride gives her strength, it is this pride that makes her vulnerable to the Kauravas as her husbands fail to protect her. Towards the end of the novel, when Draupadi leaves to climb to 'svarg' or heaven in her human form with her husbands, even then Maya tries to hold her back. But at Mayapuri, Maya falls down and dies, thus Draupadi is relieved from the bondage of Maya or illusion.

"Draupadi is herself responsible for her fall. She was too fond of Arjun. It is this that is her sin." Saying these words, Yudhishtira left behind his wife, one who had regarded her five husbands as her five senses. She had slipped on the golden dust of the Himalayas while walking towards heaven. Draupadi had sinned by loving Arjuna? She had loved and kept all the Pandavas united but in the end, she was left behind to die because she loved Arjuna. But did her love for Arjuna bring her any good? Did Arjuna really love Draupadi the way she had craved for him? If he had then she wouldn't have been humiliated in the assembly-hall, she wouldn't be left lying on the Himalayas if he had loved her. The relationship of Phalguni and Krishnaa is incomplete. Although Arjuna was the one who hit the target in the 'svayamvara' yet he had to give up his wife, without her consent, in the name of dharma. Naturally, Draupadi had fallen in love with the brave Arjuna but she only suffered at his behest, she only longed for Arjuna's love.

When it was determined that Krishnaa would play the role of the wife to one Pandava at a time for a period of one year, Arjuna was so dejected that he could not bear to stay in Indraprastha and he consciously breaks the rules of the one-year bond resulting in his banishment from the kingdom for twelve long years where he would live as a celibate brahmin. Krishnaa was depressed with Arjuna's decision as she had been waiting to unite to with Arjuna. After Krishna, Arjuna was the only prevailing thought in Krishnaa's mind and now she had to wait for twelve years to gain the love she pined for from Phalguni. Krishnaa had made up her mind too, that if Phalguni is going to live as celibate Brahmin she too would become a sanyasi for the period in which she had to play his wife's role. Draupadi kept her promise, she became a sanyasi but Phalguni could only give her heartache. When Arjuna returned from his exile he brought with him another wife, the lovely Subhadra, sister of Krishna Vasudeva. Arjuna had broken yet another rule but for this he was praised. Draupadi accused the male-oriented values and the dharma they followed. She had been deprived of



everything she wanted and yet she is punished for the 'sin' of loving Arjuna the most. Draupadi's saga is a poignant depiction of a woman's, especially a Kshatriya woman of her time, development and acclimatization in to the patriarchal norms which are ever changing for the women. And this incident is just a meagre example of the situation of such women.

When Draupadi is left behind on the Himalayas, she asks her 'priya Sakha, Krishna asks for five things. Pratibha Ray has put forth the generous character of Krishna who in her dying hours doesn't ask anything for herself but everything for the welfare of the world. Firstly, she requests Govinda to lay down such a rule that no woman has to marry several men at a time. What happened to her, the atrocities she faced, no other woman should face difficulty and humiliation in life. Krishna is well aware of the fundamental reason for the tragic events of her life. Living with five husbands, all of whom had different preferences, made her task even more daunting. The start of such confusion is first seen in chapter 12 of *Yajnaseni*. Yudhishtira has invited Govinda to play a game of dice with him and asks Krishna to watch the game but Krishna says, "Grant me time. Your younger brothers have asked for me. I shall come after meeting them and then watch your dice game." (Ray 100) Yudhishtira insists leaving Draupadi in dilemma. Such incidents are common in her life. Thus, she asks Krishna for this boon.

Draupadi recalls the aftermath of the war called the Mahabharata. The eighteen days of bloodshed and agony. In the war, Draupadi loses her father and sons like Ghatotkacha and Abhimanyu. Their death pains her but she is relieved that her own five sons have survived the war. In the night of rejoicing, after the war has ended, Ashwatthama, the son of Guru Dronacharya, kills all the five sons of Draupadi. Earlier too, she had been deprived of her children's tenderness when she had been exiled for thirteen long years. And not long after her return Ashwatthama, in a fit of rage, kills them off. Draupadi is devoid her sons' love. She lived in agony throughout her life and with the death of her children the pain never ceased. Thus, her second wish is that no mother, not even the mother of the enemy, should grieve for her children because she faced it and knows that there is no pain more hurtful than the grievance for a dead child.

The third boon Draupadi asks from Krishna is that no woman should ever face the humiliation that she faced in the assembly-hall of the Kauravas. Draupadi had developed a strength to bear the trials of life. She had resolved firmly not to harm the good people, and not to bend before the wicked. Draupadi was woman, but she became as famous as the heroic Pandavas because of such determination. Her personality was one of lightning and thundering. She asks Krishna to give such strength to every woman, to make them beautiful but not to make the men so lustful. She does not want any other woman to feel the torments of the males as she did.

Krishna asks Krishna that no more warfare should take place after the earth-wrecking 'Mahayuddha'. She has faced the outcome of the war. No war should happen in the name of religion, caste, gender, race or language. Veda Vyasa tells her that in the future man

is going to reach the pinnacle of achievement in civilization, science and culture. She warns Krishna that these achievements might provoke the power-hungry men to launch great wars bringing the mother earth to ruins. She pleads to Krishna that he should avoid such disaster that fell upon Kuru the clan and maintain peace and prosperity. Her fourth demand is for the welfare of creation and unity of nations leading to peaceful living.

The fifth thing she asks for is surprisingly, neither 'moksha' nor the path to 'svarg'.

"I, Panchali, the heroine of five heroes, the princess of Panchal, and the mother of sons. With the fifth demand I shall complete the final chapter of my body made up of five elements. [...] I do not want moksha, salvation. I do not want to reach 'svarg' in this body — not even liberation. It's rebirth that I crave." (Ray 397)

Despite the torments she faced in her life, Krishnaa has the courage to ask for rebirth. But she doesn't shy away from challenges throughout the narrative of the epic. She has proved time and again that she brave and courageous, one who will not be suppressed by any evil-doer in society. She wants to be reborn but this time she wants to see the pleasing side of life where peace could prevail. Thus, she demands these five things from Krishna.

During her lifetime, a female is supposed to play several roles, with or without her consent — of ayielding daughter, obedient wife, sacrificing mother, and other such roles. Each role she plays is to be adhered to with full dedication, irrespective of her choices and needs. A male member, on the other hand, acts as the pillar of a house and the woman is tied to this pillar by a rope which only gives her the space to roam about within the household. She acts as a nurse and caretaker who binds everyone with the other just like Draupadi binds the Pandava brothers together. Yet her service goes unrecognized and unaddressed. Perhaps for Krishnaa it was the change in role every year to act as the wife of a different person that made her life merely an agonizing existence. Draupadi's virtue and goodness become her demerits because she is too good for the society. While playing the role of wife of brother, she had to treat the other four brothers like their caretaker. She had to be present at their beck and call. At the same time, she had to serve her mother-in-law, Kunti and whoever came into the house as guests. She had to live up to the reputation of the Kuru clan. Pratibha Ray gives one such example in the novel where Draupadi again is prone to a dilemma when she meets Karna at different occasions.

Pratibha Ray is able to develop the story line where Karna and Draupadi, entangled in their own worlds of mutual misunderstanding, false ego and guilt, are unable to communicate with each other. Yet there are times when they cannot avoid each other and their confrontation is inevitable. The reason for their first face to face encounter after they move to Indraprastha is because of her mother-in-law Kunti. She tells Draupadi, "Karna is my son according to dharma, my 'dharma-putra'. I have accepted him as such. Morally, you should consider Karna in the same light as the five Pandava brothers. But it is his misfortune that he is the adopted son of a charioteer." (Ray 116) Kunti herself is running away from the reality. She is the real mother of Karna whom she bore before her marriage. She conceals this deep

secret, and in a way, Draupadi has to bear its consequences. She forbids Karna from taking part in her 'svayamvara', demeaning Karna, calling him a 'suta-putra'— son a low caste charioteer. Karna takes his revenge through the course of the novel, always ready to avail the opportunity to taunt Draupadi. This is prominently felt when Karna throws a bouquet of blue roses at the feet of Draupadi, while she was being welcomed at Hastinapur as a royal bride. Draupadi happens to step on it inadvertently, and her foot is hurt, as a thorn pricks it. Karna promptly belittles her with his barbed words: "Beg forgiveness from the royal bride. I did not pain her deliberately. I know what the pain of being deliberately tormented in public is like." (Ray 111) Although, in Draupadi dwells a compassionate feeling for Karna, as he is devoid of many opportunities on this basis of his birth, yet Karna is remorseless towards Krishnaa. The compassion for Karna perishes from Draupadi's heart on the horrendous day of her 'Vastraharan'.

When Duhshasan dragged Draupadi into the assembly-hall, she was questioning the authority of the Kauravas over her and also of Yudhishtira, who had first lost himself in the dice game and thus lost authority over everything else. While Draupadi was making a valid point to save honour and pride, it is Karna who speaks up against Draupadi. He is the one who provokes Duhshasan to strip Draupadi off her single garment in front of the gathered men in the assembly-hall. Such vehemence from Karna was not expected by Draupadi and she is left stunned. Karna, arguably, is best among of all of Kunti's son. Perhaps his ignoble behaviour towards Krishnaa in the assembly-hall is the only blemish on his character. Iravati Karve writes, "There was no reason (for Karna) to thus dishonour the wife of the defeated men. [...] He had no cause to take part in the quarrel between the cousins. He not only participated in it but became so involved that he showed that under stress he could forget all humane considerations." (Karve 146) Karna might be the unsung hero of *The Mahabharata* but his demeanour towards Draupadi ceases his character to attain the glory of his heroics that he deserved.

The character of Draupadi continues to be misinterpreted. Not many among the 1.25 billion Indians have read the epics themselves. On the hearsay we have sullied our own culture. Ray gives a very contemporary example of someone she knew. She says that she knew a lady named Krishnaa who left her drunkard husband and came back to her parents' home. Krishnaa thought of remarrying, but in our society remarrying, especially for woman, is not very simple. So, Krishnaa moves to Germany where his brother lived. There she gets married, has kids and starts living a happy conjugal life. It gets ironic though when the women who were once sympathetic towards her and advised her to remarry, start saying, "Well! When her very name is Krishnaa, she could be happy only after taking a second husband. 'Arre!' The Krishnaa of Mahabharat took five husbands, and still not being satisfied, was attracted to Karna and Krishna..." (Ray 401)

Krishnaa, being an archetype of Indian women, has been projected as one of the most tormented females in *The Mahabharata*. Women have been treated like objects and

its evidence is found not only in the epics and mythologies but through many other historical texts. In fact, the condition of women has not changed very drastically in the remote areas, the women are still being subjugated. Writers such as Madhu Kishwar comment on the contrast between Sita and Draupadi:

Sita's offer of 'agnipariksha' and her coming out of it unscathed is by and large seen not as an act of supine surrender to the whims of an unreasonable husband but as an act of defiance that challenges her husband's aspersions as a means of showing him to be so flawed in his judgement that the gods have to come and pull up Ram for his foolishness. Unlike, Draupadi, she does not call upon them for help. Their help comes unsolicited. (Kishwar 23)

There have been many Draupadis and Sitas who have sacrificed themselves, lived their lives for the preservation of the so called 'dharma' and yet they are looked down upon. Men have dominated the society by means of their own set of rules but Draupadi was the one who tried to defy these rules and in modern day there have been many such Draupadis who have stepped up and voiced their opinion in the patriarchal society. Ray's 'Yajnaseni' in *Yajnaseni* asserts the moral strength of women:

Tolerance is the ornament of women. But to bear injustice with bowed head is not the dharma of women. [...] The remaining days of my life I will fight against injustice, adharma, sin [...] though the world may call me an ogress because of this, the world must know that the woman, who creates, is auspicious, is also the destroyer of the sinful and the wicked. It is after washing my hair in Dushasana's blood that I shall tie it up. Dushasana who, regarding women as weak dragged me by the hair and insulted me. Then will the world know that while woman's heart is delicate, it is not weak. (Ray 251)

The name Yajnaseni symbolizes she who was born of the yajna (the sacrificial fire) which suggests that she was not the biological daughter of King Drupada. After a show of strength which doubles up as the courting period, she is married off to a man she has heard of but never known of. In an age when words and promises were sacrosanct, one word by her mother-in-law ends up making her the wife of not one but five men: the Pandavas. The Pandavas initially treat Draupadi more like a domestic animal and not rising beyond that. Draupadi while bound in her love for Arjuna, sacrifices everything to keep the unity of the Pandava family intact. She tries many a time to break free from these chains of oppression but fails in every way. While the *Ramayana* is an epic of righteousness, the mechanizations of *Mahabharata* are more humane. It is mostly a history of oppression of women by men and the sly but ruthless moves by women which ends up tumbling empires. Through insults, tribulations, joys, sorrows and laughter she carries her family through and sails forth into her life until the dice game with the Kauravas arrive.

Many of us have read different accounts of *The Mahabharata*. But most of the early reinterpretations of the epic were from the male perspective. The protagonist of this book is a

woman, Draupadi, and this differentiates it from other books. The author has given a beautiful account of the mindset of Draupadi, both as a damsel and as the queen of Pandavas. Reading this book opens one's eyes to the condition of women in this male dominated society. Through the example of Draupadi it shows that how even without any wrongdoing of their own, women are declared faulty and punished.

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