

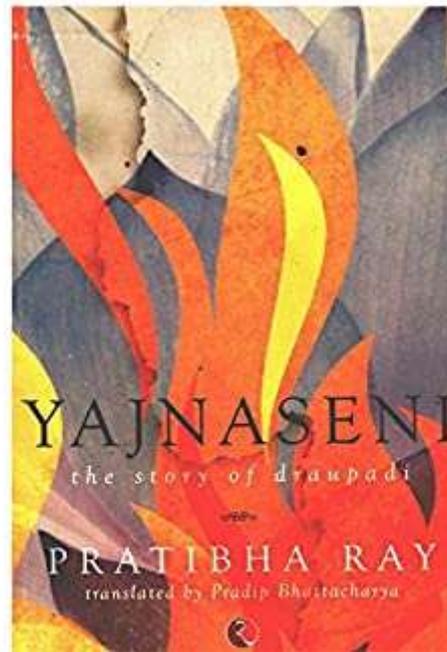
**Symbol of Valour, *Dharma* and Liberation:
Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni***

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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Yajnaseni-Story-Draupadi-Pratibha-Ray-ebook/dp/B015P6AZ4O/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Yagnaseni&qid=1617507227&s=books&sr=1-1

Abstract

The character of Draupadi or Yagnaseni in the *Mahabharata* shows the subaltern position of women in the society. Her character portrayal is of immense interest to women writers who explore the various dimensions of her personality and study it from a feminist point of view. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* is one such work that delineates the character of Draupadi from a feministic perspective and establishes her as one of the greatest women characters of time who preserved the dharma, displayed courage, and nurtured feminine liberation. The current research paper aims to study Pratibha Ray's delineation of Draupadi in her novel *Yajnaseni*. The character of Draupadi has been critically examined to establish the fact that Draupadi is a representative of the womankind and womanhood. She is a symbol of valour, *dharma*, femininity, and liberation.

Keywords: Pratibha Ray, *Mahabharata*, Yagnaseni, feminine, valour, liberation, *dharma*.

The core Indian culture is reflected in the myths that form an integral part of the Indian history. It can be said that the thoughts, ideas, and ideologies that govern the Indian way of life have most often been the result of the various myths that provided a pattern and shaped the thoughts of generations. The myths are a reflection of the state of the society during most of the times and also throw light on the gender divide that amounted to discrimination during the era. *Mahabharata*, the greatest epic of the mythical history of our country, is a repository of the true reflection of condition of the society of the age. Interestingly, it stands relevant even today. In the words of Deshpande: “If there is one single work that which has proved to be of the greatest significance in the making of life and thought of the Indian people and whose tradition continues to live even to this day and influence, in one way or another, the various aspects of Indian life, it is the *Mahabharata*”. (199). It is also an account of how the male and the female had different and defined codes of conduct that essentially bordered on discrimination.

Sunal Sharma remarks “every generation writes its own new history” (139). This history is the mirror of the society of that times. The great history and myths of India have given a true picture of the society and always presented woman as the ‘subaltern’ with their position and status clearly defined. And that is why women writers have continued to explore the realms of myth and tried to study the women characters from a feminist point of view. Deshpande’s statement can be considered pertinent in this regard: “...the basic problem is that not only myths have originated with men, their interpretation has also been in male hands.” (87). Thus, women writers have often tried to provide a fresh perspective to the understanding of the woman characters in the mythical history and attempted to voice the anguish that enveloped the lives of these female characters who were always under the constraints of the boundaries defined for them by the conventional patriarchal society of the age.

Pratibha Ray, an Odia writer, is one such writer who has taken up the character of Draupadi or Yagnaseni from the great epic *Mahabharata* and delineated it from the point of female who is not at peace with herself because of the gender discriminatory norms of the age. She has depicted Draupadi as questioning the system of her times. She also highlights the numerous trials and tribulations that became a part of her life after her marriage with great *Pandavas*.

The current paper aims at retelling the story of the female protagonist of *Mahabharata* ‘Draupadi’ from a feminist point of view. It delineates the psychological trouble that disturbs Draupadi’s peace of mind and forces her to interrogate her status in the political and social scenario of the age. The novel in an overt manner articulates the questions and intrigues that disturb Draupadi as she realizes her marginalized position in the society.

The novel is an articulation of the anguish and travails of Draupadi as she sails through her life.

The introduction of the novel presents Draupadi as the epitome of female courage who challenges the male ego and shows her resent for it. The tone of the novel is thus, set. It is going to challenge the established patriarchal set up of the society.

Rishi Ved Vyasa in *Mahabharata* depicts Draupadi as an extraordinary woman with ethereal beauty and whose beauty becomes the cause of the great war of *Mahabharata*. Even Ray describes the beauty of Yagnaseni in the following words: “Thick hair like the waves of the ocean and large entrancing blue lotus like eyes, radiant with intelligence!” (8) But it is not only her beauty that defines her. Ray eulogizes the extraordinary valour of Draupadi in challenging the very construct of womanhood. In the Afterword, Ray remarks: “Draupadi is the challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power. Such a woman who faced torment, insult, mental and emotional dilemma has not yet been on the earth” (400). Thus, Draupadi is defined by her extraordinary external beauty and indescribable strength of character with which she faces every challenge that comes in her way.

Yagnaseni or Draupadi was born for a purpose. She rose from the alter of the fire with the aim to requite the abuse her father had borne. It was vaticinated the Draupadi’s birth was meant to sow the seeds of the destruction of the Kshatriyas. “This woman has taken birth to avenge your insult. She has appeared to fulfill a vow. By her Dharma will be preserved on this earth, Kshatriyas will be destroyed. She will be the destroyer of the Kauravas” (8). As Yagnaseni treads this path of Dharma, she is subject to endless sufferings that create a turbulence in her mind, and she faces it all alone.

Yagnaseni or Draupadi, like any normal girl nurtured the thoughts of getting married to the prince of her dreams, that is, Arjuna. She feels elated at the thought of her marriage with him and she gives in her soul to him. But as *dharma* would have it, she was to become the wife of five *Pandavas* against her choice because as per Yudhisthir, *dharma* was to obey the command of the mother even if it sounded unacceptable or impossible: “Ma, obeying you is our lives ... Let your words be true. We shall all marry Draupadi” (56). Draupadi’s mind rebelled against this very idea: “Did I have no say... Why should I accept the other brothers as husbands? Would that not destroy my *dharma*? The very idea was ridiculous: one woman to live a the wife of five men (56). She questions “Was Sita, not beautiful? But she did not have to marry all the brother of Ram to maintain unity among them” (61).

Draupadi could not put up with the idea of her marriage and her mind strictly opposed this idea that she considered “a whimsical authority”. When Arjun gave his consent to the idea, Draupadi flared up with anger. “I wished I could turn into a searing flame of the sacrificial fire and destroy the world and in it, these five brothers too” (57). She condemns

this idea of *dharma* and the *dharma* of a husband in strong words: “He who with undisturbed heart, could hand over his wife to another man for fear of his own *dharma* being destroyed, might be the most virtuous soul in the world, but he could never be a proper husband for any woman of discrimination” (57). But as fate would have it, it was for her to have five husbands and she “became the subtle thread for keeping the five flowers bound together, whom no one would see; whose pain and anguish no one would know; word of whose torment would reach none” (68). One by one she married all the five *pandavas*; swore vows five times but the only question that reverberated in her mind was, “Was this possible? Was this the truth or self-deception? (69). Draupadi accepted the five *pandavas* as her husband but her heart and soul rested with the third *pandava* ‘Arjuna’ and her mind was in state of constant turmoil when she realized that it was difficult or rather impossible for her to enjoy her marital bliss with Arjun solely. Draupadi had to play five characters with five *pandavas*. She was perplexed: ‘This body of five elements would be the possession of five persons. How would this be possible?’

*The dilemma lies stretching endlessly,
The night somehow always ends. (77)*

She muses ‘Why did God give me so many qualities that all five brothers had found their various inclinations and likes in me? What if I failed to satisfy everyone fully (88). In Draupadi we find a woman who has an interrogating mind. Although she accepts her fate tacitly, yet her mind constantly revolts against the treatment being meted out to her. In Draupadi, there is a quality that she questions the rules of the society that were different for men and women.

She stood up in revolt against the laws of the abode of the Gods, according to which one man might accept as many women as he wished but if one woman married more than one husband, she would be branded a sinner. Who laid down this law? It must be some male God! Otherwise, how could there be such distinction of virtue and sin between male and female? (92)

Her friends would ask her to keep quiet. She would angrily retort “chaste woman! Unchaste woman! In the same way why don’t the scriptures speak of chaste men, and unchaste men?... Have the scriptures prescribed lists of sins only for women?” (94). She was a woman who could understand the discriminatory nature of norms that ruled the social arena during her times.

She would even feel rebellious at Vashyadeva’s narration of her birth. “I was finished. I had offered myself for the happiness of the five *pandavas*. I had surrendered to my husbands, my entire personality and self. I did not have any likes or dislikes of my own. I surrendered myself in the form that any of them wished” (209).

Her existence is marked by poignant episodes of suffering and insults “I am the daughter of king Drupada and sister to Dhristadyumna, king Pandu’s daughter-in-law and the crowned queen of the five *Pandavas*; I am also the mother of the heroic *upa Pandavas*; and yet what insults have I had to bear!” (126)

The irony of Yagnaseni’s life is that she has five husbands but none of them to protect her or to preserve her dignity. The climax of her sufferings is reached when Yudhisthir stakes her in the dice game. She is dragged to the court by Dushyasan. She implores to be spared but in vain. “My elders are present in this assembly. They all were wise and brave men of Aryavat endowed with noble qualities. In my condition is it not shameful to drag me by the hair into this crowded hall? All are silent? Will no one answer my question?” (238). She says that she did not want pity, but she wanted to know that “does it befit the Kuru kings to insult the bride of their own clan? I wish to know: has my husband got the right to stake me after he has already staked and lost his own self?” (238). But the entire hall is silent. Yagnaseni’s questions render the entire court silent with shame. Nobody dares to face her or her questions. With her insult the entire *kuru* clan is insulted.

The verbal retaliation of Draupadi symbolizes the strength of her character. She is not ready to silently succumb to the shameful atrocity that she had been subjected to on account of her husbands’ mistake. She is valour personified. Despite the physical and mental torture that she receives at the hands of brother -in laws, it can be seen that Draupadi does not withdraw herself. Rather she faces the situation courageously and interrogates the shameful act that puts everyone to shame including her five husbands. The shame that was inflicted upon Draupadi becomes the cause of the great war of *Mahabharata*. Yagnaseni is the fire that burns the evil doer and restores *dharma* on earth. Her birth is justified. She represents the strong woman who has the ability to bring down an entire kingdom if her respect is played upon with.

But although she is the medium of restoration of peace and *dharma* on the earth, she is deserted by her husbands finally and for the last time when they do not even turn back to look at her when she is the first one to fall during the *mahaprasthan*. Her faith on the bond between a husband and wife stands shattered at this juncture. But she is still the strong Yagnaseni, Draupadi or Krishnaa, the woman who represented the real *shakti* that women have been often referred to as since time immemorial.

Yagnaseni or Draupadi is an epitome of femininity combined with immense courage. While on one hand she has desires of the feminine, on the other, she fights for her respect. She faces numerous trials all through her life but none of them could break her. With every insult, she grows stronger and even becomes the strength of her husbands and even the kingdom. She is representative of *shakti* who knows that to preserve one’s respect, when there is no other way but to stand strong and fight the injustice that is meted out. She teaches to the world that forgot to respect femininity and the principles of femininity that: “any woman

irrespective of age, caste, religion, country is worthy of a man's respect, for a woman is formed of *shakti* and without worshipping that shakti Swaroop, none can become a hero" (345).

Pratibha Ray's depiction of Yagnaseni is liberating version. Draupadi or Yagnaseni stands for the entire womankind who have been facing innumerable tortures at the hands of them without any substantial reason. Through the delineation of Draupadi, she frees the womanhood from the shackles that bind her to customs which demean her place in the society. Draupadi becomes the representative of so many women who have been grossly tortured at the hands of the evils that are present in the social arena. Draupadi is liberation. She is dharma. She is femininity with strength.

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