

**GENDER CONCERNS IN EPIC ADAPTATIONS: A GYNOCRITICAL
STUDY OF M.T. VASUDEVAN NAIR'S *BHIMA: LONE WARRIOR* AND
DR.PRATHIBHA RAY'S *YAJNASENI: THE STORY OF DRAUPADI***

A dissertation submitted to the Bharathiar University in partial fulfillment of the
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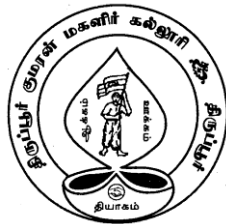
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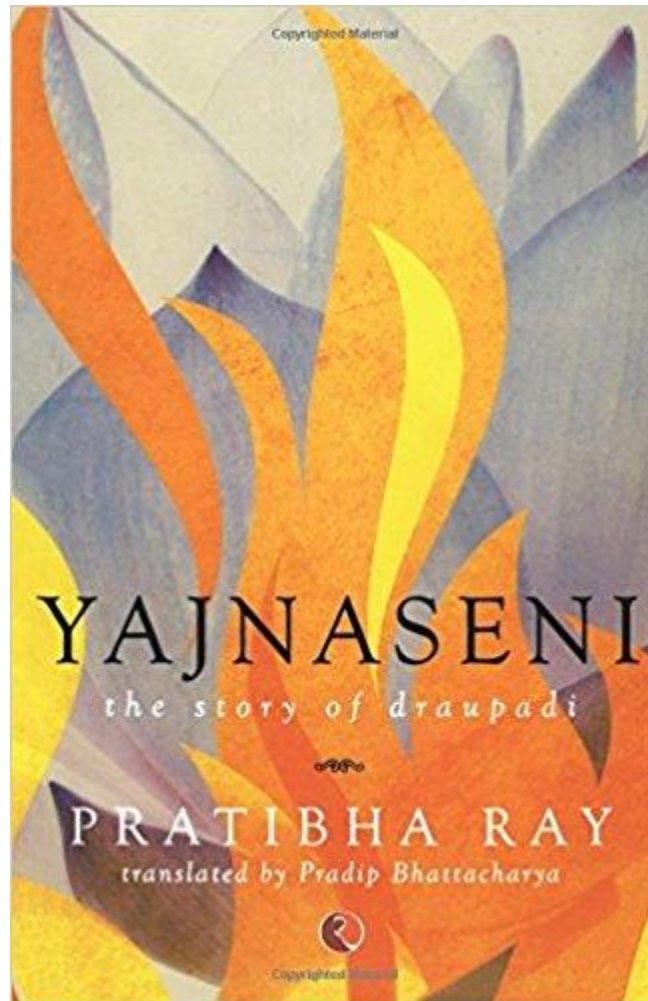
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This Article intends to map how a Gynocritical perspective can be used to bring out salient dimensions of Dr. Pratibha Ray's work of fiction *Draupadi* written originally in Oriya as *Yajnaseni*. It is an adaptation of *Mahabharata* done through the eyes of the epic's heroine Draupadi. Conventionally feminist ways of interpreting Draupadi cannot reveal the complex

layers of the work since here text isn't merely a set of signifiers to be interpreted: woman in this text is considered as the producer of a literary text as well as its meaning. *Draupadi* is also a subtle psychological study of woman as a writer destined to produce woman protagonists. The theorist who proposed the concept of gynocriticism, Elaine Showalter, earmarks the years since 1920 as the 'female phase' of women's writing. Showalter considers initiation and protest to symbolize variants of dependence. In a Gynocritical perspective, women depend on their own attitude and experience to participate in the literacy process.

Draupadi is a character that received many a present-day cross references and adaptations. In popular imagination she has become a potent metaphor to talk about harassment and ill-treatment of women, especially within the marital context. The aspect of Polyandry that she carries in the quibble on her pet-sobriquet Panchali (derogatorily meaning wife of five whereas, literally, the daughter of Panchala King) has also made Draupadi an uncanny archetype for modern day wives. The customary monogamy that defines Indian marriage system in the contemporary scenario renders Draupadi's decision to take up five husbands in a marriage of her own choice (swayamvara) in the name of Dharma an act of ambiguous piety. There is a shade of hypocrisy in the suggestion that Yudhishtira makes regarding the sharing of a wife that Arjuna had won in the swayamvara competition. Kunti's wickedly smart advice to 'share' what the sons 'earned' that day in their exploit seals Draupadi's autonomy of marital choice. Indian mass media and popular culture has severally used this suggestion of Kunti's. Wives have been typically seen by Indian popular consciousness as 'objects' earned by sons to hold the family together. Wrong 'choices' of sons, as the patriarchal common sense goes, sunders the family apart.

Draupadi is a troublesome archetype for the modern day woman. In her imagination, Dr. Ray exploits these complex layers of signification that Draupadi commands. *Yajnaseni* becomes an iconic work that redrafts the social-cultural agency of one of the boldest women characters in Indian society ever accommodated in its collective psyche. By situating Draupadi in a milieu that is unarticulated in Mahabharata, and by making her deal with situations never imagined by Vyasa or any later re-tellers of the tale, Dr. Ray brings to the fore the disobedient female prerogative as a writer. In the novel, said in an epistolary style, she portrays women-power, innocence, helplessness and hysteric womanhood through Draupadi's disintegrating first person narrative. The epistolary style effectively captures the

inner conflicts of Draupadi as she is moving towards her final hours. The novel chooses the dramatic moment of her fall during the ascension to heaven as its launch-pad of telepathic epistles. The author indicates that a woman has access to unlimited inner sources. Draupadi in *Yajnaseni* further dismantles the agencies of male characters in the narrative by revealing her direct interest in every single turn that the plot takes in the epic during and after the war. The author's idea is to portray a projected and empowered Indian archetype of Draupadi whose polyandry is beside the point.

Draupadi in popular adaptations of *Mahabharata* is a righteous woman, an epitome of moral virtues, one among the so-called Panchanaris (*five noble women of Indian mythology*). Pratibha Ray adds so much of physicality and love on to Draupadi's idealized body and mind. It thus becomes the story of a silent love between her and Lord Krishna. It also becomes the story of the frustrations of Karna, who also won the swayamvara target but did not achieve the prize of marrying Draupadi only because he was born to a lower caste. It is the story of negligence from the part of Arjuna towards Draupadi, though he was the real prince to win the archery competition held for her swayamvara. Both Karna and Draupadi suffer Platonically in their proud cocoons. *Yajnaseni* questions why Indian women swear unwavering and masochistic devotion to their husbands. It discusses the paradox that polyandry in essence did not make the burden of fidelity less, but five times more than the usual.

There are only very few women in Indian epics who are respected for their intellect and are confident enough to open their mind and voice in a patriarchal world. Draupadi is one among them and a very significant one at that. Ray does not miss out to cite the celestial voice that proclaimed at Draupadi's birth that 'This unparalleled beauty has taken birth to uproot the Kauravas and establish the rule of Dharma' (*Yajnaseni* 18). Ray here remolded her to an Indian woman who has shouldered the hefty weight of setting morality right in the society. *Yajnaseni* is an inspiration to every woman who strongly believes that her role in society and politics is more crucial than the ones she would play in her personal life. Draupadi had a friend and a trusted one at that: Lord Krishna. She knows that he will lend her his ears anytime. Draupadi and Lord Krishna share a very positive relationship. Draupadi always considered Lord Krishna as her 'Sakha' or 'beloved friend' and Krishna addressed her as 'Sakhi', symbolic of the platonic love that would later cause the telepathic epistles.

Yajnaseni moves through a broad field of cultural, social, political psychological, economic

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and artistic analyses that closely examine the construction of domesticity of women in Indian contexts, and at various times in history.

The schema of *Yajnaseni* fits squarely with the latest phase of Feminist knowledge-production. Earlier, as feminist criticism shifted from the first to the second wave, feminist critique turned its interest from androcentric texts to the androcentric critical strategies that pushed women's writing to the margins of the literary canon. Earliest examples of this genre were concerned primarily with describing and documenting the prejudice against women writers that clouded the judgment of well-placed readers, that is, reviewers and critics. Today we have more sophisticated and more comprehensive analysis of the androcentric critical tradition. Gynocriticism seeks to construct a female frame work for the analysis of women's literature in contrast to loving fixation on male culture by developing new models based on the study of female experience. Rather than to adapt male models and theories, Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the newly visible world of female culture. It is comparable to the ethnographer's effort to render the experience of the 'muted' female half of a society's described in piercing women. The debate about men and gender started in Europe in the wake of women's liberation movements and male liberation movement. In the 1970's attempts were made to reform the male sex roles resulting in serious discussion about gender roles of male and female.

Draupadi's essential woman status is also due to her prowess for mothering. She pours and fills motherhood throughout the novel. She is a dystopian woman browsing all the areas and aspects of woman's life without any prejudices. The work *Yajnaseni* squarely builds itself on women's experiences. Its plans include construction of a frame work that could analyze women's writing in general and Draupadi's fantasies in particular, and development of a new model of writerliness deriving its basis from female experience. The work pits itself against the variables of male literary tradition.

Draupadi shows the features of the head of a matriarchal family. She had developed the strength to bear the trials of life. The epic heroine is in no way less than Bhima or Arjuna in strength and spirit or valor and virtue. Like a mother in a family, her story is a saga of suffering and disgrace but she took everything in her stride and vanquished each one of the perpetrators of her humiliation and agony. Draupadi finds her five husbands discarding her

repeatedly; each takes at least one more wife except Yudhishtira. She never gets Arjuna to herself for he marries Chitrangada and has Subhadra as his favorite. Yudhishtira pledges her like he chatted at a game of dice, and finally, they leave her to die alone on the roadside like a pauper, drained in every sense. The genesis myth of Draupadi is rather famous: king Drupada conducts yaga for having a mighty son. Drushtadyumna is born to him. Draupadi who comes as a bonus in this yaga is unasked for ever since her birth. She comes without being called. Girl children are always unasked in Indian families. But like Draupadi, girls often become the protectors of their family and society itself. The female phase of Jnanpith writer Pratibha Ray has shown the identity of woman through her feminine protagonist.

Myth is more than a fictitious belief. And a character like Draupadi has relevances and resemblances in the present. Draupadi is a witness and victim of polygamy and polyandry. She has to cope with other wives of her beloved Arjuna. Bhima, the rough fellow tries to insult her by saying about Hidumbi and Balandhara. Though polygamy is unbearable to some extent, the five Pandavas are seen to be enjoying their sexual life with Panchali. It is to be noted that men is shown to be having alternatives but woman is forced to have sex with the five that she is tied in marriage with. Infidelity and extramarital relations in the contemporary world do not correspond to the sexual equations of the times when the epic was composed. But, in our sense, it becomes infidelity. Puranas have always justified the carnal pleasure of heroes in the name of cursing and blessing. Pandavas are shown as never quarrelsome on the name of Draupadi. But Ray insinuated that it is only because they are holding other alternatives for their sexual pleasure.

Virginitly of woman becomes a central question in *Yajnaseni*. Draupadi obtained the boon of regaining virginitly after being with each husband. It is quite sarcastic that Bhima married Hidumbi and she was pregnant when he deserted her. Bhima also demands virginitly from his bride Panchali. Virginitly is defined for woman and there is no tool to measure the sexuality of men and their virginitly. Chastity, virginitly, obedience, patience, respecting forefathers etc are responsibilities reserved for women. There is no word in Indian culture as 'patnivrathan', a counterpart for 'Pativratha'. The author pens the mysterious mind of a woman who had a deep affection to Karna, the real hero in *Mahabharata*, and Lord Krishna whom she loved very much. She believed in Pandavas and trusted in Krishna. Thus here the author reveals the universal truth that a woman should trust her male friend than her five husbands. The relationship between men and woman is redefined by Pratibha Ray by

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supporting the epic heroine. *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* impose heavy moral responsibilities to women and make men relatively free from it. Ray has broken all the moral concepts imposed on Indian woman by highlighting the inter personality and keeping a different identity in society. Draupadi and Lord Krishna shared a very divine relationship. It is considered as the symbolic of the platonic love existing between the fiery Krishnaa and Lord Krishna.

Draupadi becomes the centre of Matriarchal power among Pandavas during the time of their forest life. She was blessed with an “akshayapatra”, the pot ever filled with food, by Dharma Raja and the pot will be empty after the dinner of Draupadi. It is noted that Draupadi starved for a long time to feed others. Though she had an emotional jealous upon Hidumbi in the case of Bhima, she loved everyone and loved by everyone. Her conjugal life was strictly regimented, requiring tremendous self control. All her sentiments and emotions needed a great deal of adjustment when she changed her life style for each husband accordingly. Draupadi was living not only in a polyandrous relationship but a polygamous one as well because the Pandavas had other wives except Yudhishtira. Draupadi managed this delicate relationship harmoniously. Kunti gave birth to sons from different powers and Nakula and Sahadeva belongs to Madri’s sons, the second wife of Pandu who practiced sati along with her husband. It is Draupadi who maintained the harmonious brotherhood and unity by running like a catalyst among the five. We often hear a comment like Draupadi’s unparalleled beauty and intelligence became the cause of her misery. It is not the curse of Draupadi but the problem of choice aroused from her father and brother. If they believed in secularism or gave the right to Draupadi for selecting her husband, the story of Mahabharata will lead to a new humanity of secularism and socialism. She is denied fullness of married life with Arjuna who she loves with all her heart *Yajnaseni* true to their appellation she burns with men’s ill treatment. The ancient Indian women occupied a very important position, in fact a superior position to men. It is a culture whose only words for strength and power are feminine ‘shakti’ means ‘power’ and ‘strength’. All made power covers from the feminine.

Literary evidence suggests that kings and towns were destroyed because a single woman was wronged by the state. Valmiki’s *Ramayana* teaches us that Ravana and his entire clan were wiped out because he abducted Seeta. Vedvyasa’s *Mahabharata* teaches that all the Kauravas were killed because they humiliated Draupadi in public. Draupadi tells the story of twin Nishada kids who were breast feed by her. She didn’t care of any caste discrimination

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when she was living in forest. Divinity is her caste at the same time the motherhood in her heart is always weeping by thinking about five sons who were bought up in Dwaraka. Mahabharata has a mother centered epic features. The great mothers like Gandhari, Kunti and Draupadi have elite status in the epic. The strength of Draupadi is her confidence on her beauty and wit.

Draupadi questions the relationship of men and women under the bond of marriage. She is criticizing patriarchy and reveals the sacrifice of a woman in a conjugal life. She questions that whether a woman is a goods for sale and does she has her own personality. All are sacrificed for the sake of life. It is quite astonishing that she had suffered unbearable miseries in life and till she would like to born as a girl in next life. She asks what is actually won in life except blaming and cursing from others. Being a woman she has violated all her boundaries like age, race, caste and other limitations. She respects womanhood. Being a woman she had produced all the thoughts not only for women community but for the whole society with a compulsion of rethinking. *Yajnaseni: the story of Draupadi* finds its foundation as post-colonial work. India is retaining the lost culture and her mythical relevance.

Ray asserts her ideological stances through Draupadi as a postcolonial Indian Woman. The story of Draupadi could be said to be starting from the end of colonial rule. In this sense Kurukshetra war could be considered as the independence war. The protagonist is writing about the miseries of colonized women and her limitations. She starts the verbal life with Lord Krishna after the end of the war. Everything is redefined. The postcolonial Draupadi is fearless to express her thoughts to her friend.

Draupadi ridicules the fraudulent relationships of husband and wife. She was deserted by them two times. The first instance was during the disrobing before the blind King's courtiers when she was pledged as dice gambling property. It was done by the Dharmaputra Yudhishtira and others kept quiet. The second time she was given up by Pandavas was when they walked towards Mahaprasthan. There is no hope. It was the end of her life nobody cared of her except Bhima. The only blame she was heard by Yudhishtira was that she loved Arjuna more and she deserved this falling. She never considered herself as a daughter of goddess. Instead she behaved as an ordinary woman. The birth of Draupadi from the Yaga Pyre tells that she was born for fulfilling her father's ambition. Women are born for fulfilling others needs and wishes. She behaved like an ordinary young girl.

Epics have celebrated the virtues of virginity and Pativrathya as best as they can. It was Yudhishtira who imposed the responsibility of bringing togetherness among Pandavas through Draupadi. It is the Dharma of Draupadi. But the same Yudhishtira had the craze of gambling which caused the destruction of Pandavas their dignity among Kauravas. Draupadi finds her own justification to be a polyandrous representative that body is built by PanchaBhootas and Pandavas are born out of PanchaBhootas. Since Lord Krishna was well aware of the disasters that are to be faced by Draupadi, he presents 'Indraneelam' to her for releasing her mental conflicts by looking at it. Maya, the dearest friend of Krishna became the Sakhi of Draupadi who is very brilliant and excellently deals the problems by finding out proper solutions. Here Krishna is taking up the role of a psychological counselor who can mould the behavior of Draupadi according to his wish. Everyone needs a silent listener than an instructor. Maya becomes a listener and assistant to Draupadi. 'Indraneelam' becomes an instrument for mind refreshment by looking on it for a long time.

During the time of forest-living for 12 years, Arjuna sarcastically compares Draupadi to Seeta. Seeta has one and only husband where as Draupadi have five. Arjuna often plays the role of a sadist with Draupadi. He embraced forest life for 12 years purposefully to take emotional revenge against Draupadi for having marital relation with five men Yajnaseni tries to commit suicide like any other human being who can't bear the overload of sufferings in life. Ray simplifies the epic heroine by the suicide attempt. It was Karna who saved her life from drowning in river. Karna is the personal grief of Draupadi and vice versa. A man will suffer all failure but can't afford the avoidance by woman. Rejection of Draupadi to marry Karna during the time of archery contest is the root cause of Karna's rivalry towards Draupadi and he loves her too. When she beds with other four except Arjuna, she imagined herself that she is mating with Lord Krishna. There is a psychology behind this notion. Her inner mind focuses on the love of Lord Krishna rather than any other. She finds the facial similarities of her five sons to Lord Krishna. At the same time her mind fluctuates when the thought turns to Karna. Arjuna also gets priority in her heart. Here it is a triangle relationship in the marital life of Draupadi- Lord Krishna, Brave Warrior Karna and Whole heart lover Arjuna. She asks whether it is the practice of violating Pativrathya or chastity. Morality always seeks the physical violation of sexual laws imposed on married woman. Nobody bothers on her inner mind thoughts and imagination. Draupadi expresses love and lust towards Arjuna. But Subhadra needs the same from Arjuna. And he shares the dilemma of a

man who steps into two boats in a river. But Draupadi never have any complaints on her confusions on love and being loved.

Ray connects culture and women's education through the comments of Shakuni on Draupadi's education. "The greatest offence of woman commits is to try to be learned. It is because she became wise and scholarly that her condition is thus!"(238) Shakunis are always considering women education as a revilement to the society. Draupadi questions Dharma. She demands justice. She remembers the king Drutharashtra that to protect the honour of women is the dharma of a king. She wants to know whether her husband got the right to take her after he has already staled and lost his own self. But the calm voice of Bhishma replies like this. "Immaculate one! One who is dependent does not have the right to stale someone else's wealth. But the wife is ever her husband's dependent. Therefore, whether, after having lost himself, Yudhishtira has the right to stake you or not" (228). The matter of freedom of woman arises from here. Woman should be free from the marital bondage if she has acquired freedom in all senses like profession, education and other deeds family imposes on her. Draupadi is asking for the freedom of women. Dussasana said that beautiful woman has no right for argument. "Stop this nonsense, lovely one! Legal arguments do not suit beautiful women. Now if you do as we wish, it will be well for you"(229). The men in Bharata consider all the worthy of a woman is not her intellectuality but her beauty. All are blind with the beauty of Draupadi. Ray created the hard hearted Draupadi who warns Lord Krishna. "Sakha, if those who were responsible for the horrifying outrage that Draupadi suffered in the Kura court for wicked misbehavior, do not receive exemplary punishment, then the history of Bharata will be filled with shameful account of atrocities against women "(251)

Again she becomes a vengeful woman by saying "To enjoy the beauty of naked women with lust crazed eyes will become the normal pastime of debauched men" (251). It is noteworthy that Draupadi need not disappear like Seeta even if it is possible. She wants to fight against the evilness of the human king. If she had done so, her modesty would have been protected but the wicked would not have been punished. In the future this problem would remain unresolved for women. According to her, tolerance is the ornament of woman. But to bear injustice with bowed head is not the dharma of women. If the husband adopts the wrong path and the wife remain quiet, then everyone will suffer. The portion of sin in the world will increase. Innocent people will suffer the consequences of sin. Happiness, prosperity and enjoyment of the kingdom are not the aims of her life. The meaning of days of

her life is to fight against injustice, adharma, and sin. She says; “I have sworn that I shall tie up my hair only after washing it in Dussasana’s blood. Otherwise these tresses will ever remain loose.”(251).

Draupadi continues that the world may call her an ogress because of her oath: the world must know that woman who creates, is auspicious is also the destroyer of the sinful and the wicked. It is after washing her hair in Dussasana’s blood that she shall tie it up. Pratibha Ray tries to present the crisis of feminities in relation to war, bravery, lust, sex and their responsibility to protect Draupadi’s husbands from wars and make them proper preparation for Kurukshetra war. The inner conflict of Draupadi leads her to become a powerful woman to fight against unjust. All women in this novel are portrayed as victims of patriarchy rather than as hegemonic kings. “I kept thinking that in future if anyone protected myself respect and honour it would be this outspoken, transparent quick to anger Bhimasena’s”. (260)

The author is condemning the qualities of Pandavas like dharma, bravery, chastity etc. Some considerations were given to Bhima, the rude among the five brothers. It was he who considered her as a wife or a woman. Draupadi is the most complex and controversial female character in Hindu literature. On the one hand, she could be womanly compassionate and generous, on the other, she could wreak havoc on those who did her wrong. She was never ready to compromise on either her rights as a daughter- in law or even on the rights of Pandavas and remained ever ready to fight back of avenge high- handedness and injustice meted out her modesty. She secretly vowed that one day she would definitely seek vendetta on the injustice meted out her. The revision of myths prevalent in the Indian society and literature has been a subject of keen interest for many writers like Mahasweta Devi, Sarah Joseph and so on. 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 endeavor to characterize 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. *Yajnaseni: the story of Draupadi* is no exception in this regard. It could be considered as successful attempt from the writer to recreate the mythical heroine as an ordinary woman with her own views and thoughts on life. Elaine Showalter suggests that “Women to invent language that is not oppressive, a language that does not leave speechless but that loosen the tongue. Feminine language must be, by its very nature, work on life

passionately, scientifically, poetically, politically in order to make it invulnerable”. Ray’s version of Mahabharata follows all the above suggestions put forward by Elaine Showalter. Ray occupies an important space for the marginalized Draupadi in ‘Vyasa Bharata’. The heroine’s conflicts and assertions occupy the centre stage.

Ray puts forward two kinds of frustrations in Draupadi. The first one is emotional frustration and the second one is economical frustration. The women are suffering from both these frustrations. Draupadi is an intellectual: hence she is restricted from performing any more important internal affairs than looking after the children, cooking food for everyone and giving sexual pleasure to her five husbands. Ray explicitly narrates the conflicts of an educated woman who is restricted from all jobs. The emotional frustration of Draupadi reveals the truth that she is an ordinary woman who wishes to be loved by everyone

The economic frustration of Draupadi has been noted in *Yajnaseni*. She is worried of serving food for sages at midnight when they came as unexpected guests. As majority of the Indian wives she is also weeping and worrying in order to face the situation. She has no economical independence to fetch the needs.. She has to meet all bitter experiences in the name of Dharma and Duty of a wife rather than a woman. Indian myths and epics were concentrated on love and lust of female heroines and they are never allowed to get in the way to the socio, political and economical affairs of the Kingdom. They should be well dressed, well mannered and well treated their husbands by giving birth to ‘Uthamapurushas’ for keeping the values and prestige of their dynasty. Even though Ray’s Draupadi is a modernist female, she is also facing the dilemmas caused by her five husbands. Being a woman in ‘Female Phase’ she has no dent to say her love and affection towards Karna and Lord Krishna. The author is very conscious on the sexual morality of womanhood. Or else it will be the determination of a strong woman like Draupadi to keep her body as a temple by keeping fluctuating love in mind. The author portrays a typical Indian womanhood in *Yajnaseni* by depicting the epic heroine as an ordinary woman.

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