

Feminist Perspectives in the novel Yajnaseni of Pratibha Rai

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Among the contemporary fiction writings from Orissa, 'Yajnaseni'- the story of Draupadi, is perhaps the best known woman's voice. Endowed with a reformist mindset its writer is a passionate crusader against social evils prevailing in the society. This work reveals the social injustice done to Draupadi, one of the five satis and a well-known mythological character who is often insulted as one with five husbands and hence implied to be a woman of loose character. Actually she was not ready to accept the five Pandavas, as her husbands but the situation compelled her to surrender herself to the situation. She felt so insulted but even her husband, in the name of religion, also was not in her favour. The writer has done psycho-analytical study of what is going on in her mind being a womanist character. Pratibhaji's objective in the depiction of the story is to clear the "negative" interpretation of the character and to give her the honour she deserves for holding the Pandavas together and being an 'agent of change in her time' and a kind appeal to treat all the women of the society with the equal respect that to man we are giving.

Introduction:

'Yajnaseni' is an Indian novel originally written in Oriya language by Dr. Pratibha Rai who is an eminent novelist and short story writer of Orissa. In her stories she has tried to reveal the underlying mysteries of the society. From romanticism, she moved to realities of life. Her interest and choice of a subject for novels and short stories are varied. The innumerable strains of modern life, the alienation of individuals, hedonistic philosophy and corruption in the narrow lanes of politics and moral degradation which comprises the nucleus of her thoughts are reflected in her novels. Her novel 'Yagnaseni' is the novel which has given her name and fame in the world of psychological novels. It is her Bhartiya Jananapith's prestigious ninth Moortidevi award winning novel.

In all languages of India, novel, stories, lyrics and other forms have developed after having come in contact with the western influences, particularly with the English literature. What we call a novel is being written in Oriya language in the period of last fifty years. Fakirmohan Senapati is recognized as the father of modern Oriya literature. Novelist like Ramshankar Rai, Madhusudan Chintamani, Mahanti Gopalbandhu, Kalicharan joined in the walk of it. Social problems concerned with country life are effectively presented in their novels. As time passed, people got social awareness. Many remarkable changes occurred in presentation and story-elements of literary forms of literary writers. Oriya literature was not an exception. The contemporary writers began to touch upon the color of 'women awareness' which was entering slowly in world literature. Feminine awakening has revealed itself in the writings of writers. But in the literature of Pratibha Rai, feminine awakening has been revealed in quite a different way. She has obtained a Ph. D. degree in Psychology. When Pratibhaji observes any episode or event occurring around her, her mind and heart penetrates into inner reality through outer surface and then she becomes prepared to produce inner reality with psychological approach on papers. The treatment of story element, subject element, story grip, curiosity, story interest and story

substance in her literature appeals to any appreciative reader's heart which has made her a well known writer in Oriya Literature.

Women consciousness has been presented in Pratibha Rai's novel as well as her stories through the protagonist in a very natural way. Women consciousness reveals through different characters. Of course, women consciousness is not so aggressive and intense in her stories. Pratibhaji only tries to show the inner burning of apparent black coal. She sees, rather observes women's problems and examines them with psychological approach. Thereafter through her observations and imagination, women's age old burning problems awaken in herself like burning volcanoes. "The search for a "social order based on equality, love, peace and integrations", continuous, since the novelist and short story-writer first wielded her pen at the age of nine. "Love and let live" is her motto." Anwesh Ray says the words in his critical review on the book. "I am a humanist" she says, "men and women have been created differently for the healthy functioning of the society. The specialties women have been endowed with should be nurtured further. As a human being however women is equal to man". Her this approach is generated in this novel also.

Several writers have treated 'The Ramayana' and 'The Mahabharata' in their different literary forms and provided seed for story plots. As twenty-first century is the age of science and technology, at the outset of this century, many social changes have come and with them, people's ways of thinking have been changed. With the changes in thoughts, the old story plot is accepted with a new approach. Even our ancient literature has not remained exception in this matter. After receiving an inspiration from 'The Mahabharata' writers like Kalidasa, Rabindranath Tagore, Shri Arbindo, Pemchand, Umashankar have created unique literary works. The woman character of the epic 'Draupadi' has attracted all the womanist writers to judge it with a new approach and a new angle which has resulted in Pratibhaji's one of the greatest literary work named 'Yajnaseni' as she has been deeply feeling in herself global awakening of women-race.

Pratibha Rai makes a determined effort for a portrayal of the epic character and brings to the surface the broader and deeper aspects of Draupadi's mind that lay submerged in the majestic sweep of the grand Mahabharata. In the novel we feel that Draupadi not only remains anchored in the epic but also rises out of its pages to become our contemporary and extremely relevant modern womanist figure to our time. She branched out to explore the more hidden recesses of the human psyche and character. Her short-story and fictional world is not an imaginary landscape. It is rooted in a concrete socio-historical reality. She prefers such stories which are unsparing in their indictment of social evils and injustice. Bigotry and obscurantism of all kinds are her particular *bête-noir* as in 'The Other God', a story that offers a savage critique of the so-called "civilized behavior of man.

Draupadi is a challenge of womanhood. Such a woman has not yet born on the earth. Beautiful women have been suffering like her throughout the ages by lust-blinded men, sometimes, even in the presence of wise, qualified and honorable men. Not only this, because of the words that slipped inadvertently from the lips of her mother in law, she was compelled to marry five brothers for which she was often abused by her family. Her life is full of joys and sorrows. A series of grieves of various types entered her life but still she was self-confident. She had totally surrendered herself to her five husbands. But despite of her sacrifice, dedication and strength, she was deprived of attaining the pleasure of heaven. When, at the last stage of her life, she slipped her step on the Himalayas foot-hill and fell down, she hopefully waited for one of her husbands to wait for her and help her. But none of her husbands even threw a glance at her. On

the contrary, Dharamraaj Yudhishtir, Lord of righteousness, said “Do not turn back to look! Come forward!” They emptied the entire cup of blame on her head and went away leaving her at death’s door! Yudhishtir’s these words had shattered Pratibhaji’s Draupadi’s heart. She thought, “How false is this bond between a husband and a wife! Affection, love, sacrifice and surrender! If man suffers the consequences of his own deeds, then offering myself at the feet of five husbands for the sake of preserving Yudhishtir’s dharma! Why did I have to bear the burden of the whole world’s mockery, sneers, innuendos, abuse, scorn and slander?”(3) This novel begins with the Draupadi’s life ending period. Lying at the foothills of Himalayas, she writes a letter to her friend Lord Krishna through which her women consciousness is revealed. The above mentioned quoted words show first awakening of women consciousness in her. Through ‘the flashback narrative technic’ the novelist has tried to depict self-aware attitudes of a woman protagonist which normally take place in almost all sensitive women of our society.

Draupadi’s awareness as a daughter:

As a daughter to king Draupad, Draupadi is a conscious and alert character. She is fully aware of her duties and rights. The novelist has tried to present that by depicting the inner anguish of Draupadi. Many injustices done to her during her role of a daughter are revealed here by sighting many instances showing her inner movement regarding her rights being a ‘daughter’ of king Draupad. Draupadi was born from the sacrificial alter built for fulfilling a vow. Her aim of taking birth was to avenge her father’s insult and to preserve dharma on this earth. After the completion of her naming ceremony, her father offered his feelings to Lord Krishna to marry Draupadi as he was the best of all men in Aryavat. Listening to that, Draupadi felt thrilled due to some unknown sensation. A heavenly, pure, sweet stream of love drenched her heart. Once when she was enjoying evening breezes in her garden, Nilanjana rushed to her to inform her that Shri Krishna was parting to return to Dwarka. She reached there and requested him to accept her pranam. With lowered face, when she offered herself at Krishna’s feet, he soon removed his feet and told to the king that she was not an ordinary woman. So for her to select a life partner Draupad had to arrange a ‘svayamvar’. Krishna’s those words seemed to churn her heart. When Krishna told Draupadi that his intimate friend-Arjun was only suitable for Draupadi and he would give name and fame to Draupadi, fulfilling his vow to defeat Drona’s arrogance, Drupad thought that his son-in-law must be the greatest of heroes, if he might be Krishna or Arjun. But Draupadi thought, “The garland that I had been weaving since the morning to put round Krishna’s neck would have to be put around Arjun’s neck. That too at Krishna’s behest! Did I have no wish of my own? No desire? No carving? Simply because I was ‘Yagnaseni’-born of the sacrificial fire? My birth, life and death-all were directed by someone else. Why had I come and why should I remain alive? Why should I die? What was their intention? I knew nothing.”²⁴ She felt as if her youth had been varnished. She had no right to take decision of herself. She had become an infant. She thought, “As an ignorant infant, I should play with whatever toy my master places in my hand! Be happy and go on living. Who was I to ask who would be my toy and why?”⁽²⁴⁾ She always thought that she had to honour only her father’s wishes. There was no meaning of her life. Sometimes she felt that she alone had to preserve dharma on the earth as if it is only her duty being a daughter of her father. She satirically responded the situation as “what option do I have? Whatever Krishna desires, father will do. It is my duty to honour Father’s wishes. Leaving dharma aside, what meaning my life hold? (27)

Once, Draupadi was strolling in the garden with Nitambini. She was teaching her talking of Arjun’s Qualities. Her brother Drishatayadumna arrived there to inform her about the death of the Pandavas. Even after that, and knowing that there was no one to suit her daughter, the

svayamwar was held. She thought that if everyone failed to fulfill the condition of the svayamwar, her father would not relax the conditions of the test. She also thought, “And if he did relax the conditions, why should I silently accept them? First I was offered to Krishna. He did not accept me and ordained that I was for his friend-Arjun. I did not feel any hesitation as Arjun had been born of a portion of Krishna himself. But if someone other than Arjun succeeded in the test due to her father’s relaxations, how can I taint my soul by wedding that person? (33). She disliked the fact that even though she was capable of taking wise decision she was not allowed to choose her life partner. Her father was playing a game about selecting her life partner. He was thinking of the person who can help him to take revenge of his insult by Drauna’s arrogance which laboured to make Drupad adept.

When Draupadi was informed about the death of Pandavas, she said her brother, “Brother! Can’t the arrangements for svayamvar be stopped?” Her brother was startled and said, “How...Pandya, Magadh, Koshal, Hastinipur, Madra, Kamboj, Gandhar and other kingdoms have come. To speak of aborting the arrangements will be a great insult to them. Panchal will have to acknowledge defeat before their united strength. Panchal will be gravely endangered. Therefore, for the welfare of the kingdom and to honour the guests, the svayamvar assembly will be held at the notified date and time. There is no other choice.”(34) Draupadi thought to herself, her danger could never be of greater importance than the danger facing the kingdom. Therefore she had to face the danger of unknown person who will fulfill the condition of the svayamvara. She was feeling so sorry as no one was there to appreciate the danger which she was facing. Sighing deeply she said that none will be able to the conditions of svayamvara and, therefore, she shall remained unmarried. Let only the danger facing the kingdom be averted and Panchal be emptied of enemies. Listening to these her brother hopefully said that, that was what was going to happen. Her brother’s those words made her disturbed. She remained silent. All the enthusiasm, dreams, fantasies, desires, anxieties aroused in her by the ceremony had died out. She accepted the truth that after all she had no role in what had occurred and what was going to occur, where was the cause for anxieties? Thus whatever she was doing was only to respect her father’s wish. Her heart was not supporting her decision.

On the day of svayamvar she had to appear before all. First she went to bathe and entered into the temple of Parvati for worship. She prayed, “Devi! Preserve my honour... If the person I have accepted as my husband has been burnt to death is that not an insult to me... If anyone other than Arjun was successful in passing the test, father would accept him as son-in-law, but how can I take him as husband?” (36). She was thinking that chaste Sita was her ideal. After reading her life story she had turned her devotee. But then she thought that to live like her was not possible for her. Like her she could not silently bear the agony by burning up within.

She was profoundly ashamed to be the target of so many lustful eyes. Before appearing before the invited worriers she was thinking, “I would be on display before all. My beauty and radiance would spur the competitors on.” (39). She was thinking, for any woman, how painful it was to have her beauty on display in an assembly hall. The entire hall filled with murmurs the moment she arrived. Young and old, Brahmin and Kshatriya, men and women – everyone gazed stunned at her dark loveliness. She wanted to hide her face in the veil. Then, as if in tune with her wish, bees left the bouquets arranged in the hall and began humming around her like a dark blue veil creating a curtain between the greedy eyes of the princess and herself. She was thinking that bees they were, but they were very sympathetic. She was grateful for their generous support. Only they could feel how painful it was for a woman to have her beauty on display before the lustful eyes. Strangely enough, scholars and priests were incapable of sensing that.

One by one all the ambitious suitors began advancing to the spot but one after another failed in fulfilling the condition of svayamvar. At last taking permission of lord Krishna one hero lifted the bow and shot the golden fish on the ground. Directions reached her for alighting from the dais with the marriage garland. But Draupadi was already affianced and betrothed to Arjun. She was thinking how could she wed anyone other than Arjun? She told this to her brother but her brother told her, "the father's dharma is the daughter's dharma. Ramchandra had taken to the forests for preserving his father's dharma. King Drupad has desired to make Aryavat's finest warrior his son-in-law. Today that best of the heroes has been tested and he stands before you. Without delay honour your father's vow and discharge the duty of a daughter." (46). She was instructed to honor her father's vow. She felt much disturbed thinking, "even if my dharma was destroyed, my father's dharma must be preserved." (46). Perhaps this is a big satire on the religious approach of our society which strongly believes that any members of father's family is not entitled to use anything of their daughter or daughter's father-in-law's home. Here such a religious father wants to make his well-versed daughter a puppet. To fulfill her father's desire she is forced to surrender herself to whatever her father points out.

Draupadi felt very much tensed as even the learned men, priests, scholars and elders could not experience the grief, the sorrowful condition she was passing through. She thought in this male-dominated society, a daughter is a toy in the hands of her brother or father. Her woman conscious mind was not ready to accept what her father, her brother, or the society was doing to her. A male dominated society is a social evil which a common woman can't understand. Pratibhaji has really very deeply experienced her situation and doing psychoanalytical study tried her level best to judge her character with new angle.

Feminine awareness in Draupadi as a wife:

All the marriage life incidents those took place in the life of Draupadi in the novel 'Yajnaseni' are representative of women race's sufferings and miseries. Even if the shooter was a poor Bhramin, Draupadi had to walk away with him harmoniously on the path of life to honor father's wish and vow. The frustrated lust crazed king's wish to snatch her away from the suitor could not be unnoticed by her. Anyway, she was protected by her husband. Then-after, they had to go by chariot to her father-in-law's house, but the bhramin opposed that and said they would go on foot. He also told that Krishna had to honor her husband's dharma. Dhristadyumna, her brother, wanted to protest but Draupadi instantly said, "Brother, now permit me to follow my dharma. This is what is proper for every woman. I too should do the same. What trouble is there in this? She, who has taken birth from sacrificial flames, can, if the need arise, immolate herself by preserving dharma. Now bid me farewell with joy." (48). Every one left speechless at her words as her explanation was a strong slap on their faces. She had tried to show them that a woman should always follow anyhow the rules laid down by the male dominant society in playing any role. She had accepted the rules of the svayamwar. She had to accept besides her affianced condition that mendicant Bhramin as her husband, obeying instruction of her brother, and then she had to obey her husband's wish as for any Indian woman, it was her humble duty to follow her husband's wish in any situation. Draupadi was thinking that every daughter did not fall into the hands of an eminent man. And even if that happened, there was no guarantee of her being entirely happy. So she did not like to be sorry for the Problem which had no solution. Taunting her father, she said, "You wanted the greatest hero of Aryawart to become your son-in-law. That has what happened." (49). Here perhaps she wanted to make them realize that all of them had thought over their problems, their vow, their Dharma. They never had taken care of her. She became very much conscious of herself looking back on her past. Directly, nothing had

happened with her as she desired. She did not know then that her role would keep changing every moment; that she would have to carry out terrible duties amid on ever changing scenario.

Passing through the forest with her husband she was quite happy. But when her mother-in-law told them, “My sons, whatever you have brought divide it amongst the five of you equally!”(55). Listening to elder brother’s call that they had brought a priceless object, Draupadi disliked the word ‘object’, even though she knew the fact that she had been remained as an object in the hands of her father, of her brother, and at last of her husband. All five brothers were ready to marry her. At that time she thought, “My mind rebelled. Did I have no say? Then what was the meaning of the svayamvara?Why should I accept the other brothers as husbands?...Why should I silently bear such an insult? Was I a lifeless statue...would these brothers impose upon me their whimsical authority and should I accept that?”(56). She was furious with her husband. She was not like other women for whom their husband is God. She thought that why did her husband not rebel hearing that his wife was to be turned into an object of enjoyment for his elder and younger brothers? On the contrary when her husband told other brothers that Krishna would be the wife of all, Draupadi once decided to turn into searing flame of the sacrificial fire and destroy the world and in it these five brothers too. If her husband were to turn into a fist full of ashes she would not be sorry. She was burning in inner anguish. An ordinary woman can’t think like this as she prefers to fast, to attend ritual ceremony, to do jap, tap and vrat for her husband’s health and wealth sake. After that critical condition she had known that her husband had nothing to do with her depression or anguish. She knew a woman had to bear everything. Sometimes she felt that was it what she wanted? – to marry five brothers to save dharma unwillingly. The truth of the universe is not unrevealed to her. She knew to be proud of once husband is one thing but r to be happy with once husbands is much more difficult, keeping the husband happy is an even more complicated task. For her too it was very difficult.

Except her, there was not a single woman married more than one husband. To justify her role of wife, she thought to become a wife of each Pandava by turn for a year and at a time mother and sister with all the Pandavas. But while passing her time with Yudhishtira, she realized that no one can ever justify everyone. She had been suffering a lot after her marriage as she married five brothers. Kauravas always taunted her for her chastity. They always said her bad words calling her a wife of five husbands. In reality she was wife of five husbands but no one was there to take care of her. On the contrary as an ideal Indian wife, it was only her duty to take care of all. Once she was not well. She needed her husband’s touch. But Yudhishtir remained content handing over the responsibility of her treatment to the royal physician. Draupadi thought he had considerable faith in the royal physician but she had lost faith in herself. She was skeptical – with five husbands and insulted by the Kauravas all through life. She would not be able to lead her healthy life. She was so much conscious of herself that for her the surrounding situation was intolerable. Once Arjun deliberately had broken the rule – not entering into other brother’s room who was busy with Draupadi , because of which he had to undergo exile in the forest as a celibate for twelve years . Draupadi could not bear the situation as she had been counting days to meet Arjun whom she loved much. But her all the efforts to stop him were proved worthless. Before going to forest she was instructed so many guidelines – what to do and what not. Draupadi thought, “But what about me? If a woman was learned or wise did no one think of her? Was there no affection, sympathy, for her in anyone? Was she stone, a lifeless piece of sculpture?”(170). When she asked about this to Arjun , he replied that he had done knowingly to punish Draupadi. Arjun was very much wishing to be always with Krishana which became not possible. Actually for that Krishana was not responsible but all of them emptied a cup of

responsibility on her shoulders only, which as a wife she does not like. In such circumstances most of the world's women would be called unchaste, if not physically then at least mentally but Draupadi could remain chaste with her controlled mind. As a wife she was quite conscious about what to do but her husbands were not. They were always in search of substitutes for replacing Krishna to get entertainment for which Krishna never thought of.

Once Duryodhan commanded queen Yajnaseni to appear in the assembly hall as Yudhishtir staked his entire property including slaves, brothers, himself and even Krishna-his wife. Draupadi as a conscious wife in a steady voice said Pratikami, "Go and asked my husband whether first he staked himself and lost or me?"(234). She easily did not accept any command from anyone. She was thinking that even a gambler could not stake his wife then how could Yudhishtir, the dharmaraja? Full of anguish and anger she was thinking: "Was woman merely men's movable or immovable property...Being a woman did I not have right even over myself, my soul? If they had rights over this body of mine, did it mean they could do as they wished with me?"(235).

At that time Draupadi had not obeyed the command of Duryodhana so Dushshashan came there to drag her to the assembly hall. His barbaric behavior had disarranged his single cloth. Before her husbands she was insulted and yet they were silent. Besides them other respectable personalities were still there. Even though, everyone was helpless. When Shakuni said ignorance and helplessness increase the charm of a woman because in such a condition she could grovel at anyone's feet and beg which she wished. Draupadi was learned so she could not do that for which perhaps she was punished. Listening to that argument she replied to Shakuni, "I do not beg for anyone's pity. I demand justice. To protect the honor of women is the dharma of a king...I wish to know: has my husband got the right to stake me after he has already staked and already lost his own self." Each and every woman of the society can't be able to ask such questions to her husband at public place. Not only that, she also challenged the Indian civilization. When she felt helpless she surrendered herself to Krishna and saved her 'satitva'. At last in the presence of all respectable Lords, the kings, priests, and others she vowed, "Till I wet my hair with the blood of Dushshashan's breast, I will leave my hair unbound thus."(244). Only a learned, courageous and rights-conscious woman can take such type of vow without taking permission of her husband. She never felt it compulsory to take permission of her husbands to do something which revealed her feminine consciousness. When they had taken shelter in one palace in disguise, shameless Keechak was misbehaving with Draupadi. On finding an opportunity, she told about that to Yudhishtir. But Yudhishtir declared her helplessness and told her to protect herself. At that time Draupadi thought the husband was the wife's god but if he was unable to protect his wife then how could he be God? Since long she also had taken vow not to say anything to Yudhishtir shading tears as he did not give any importance to his wife's insult. Not only this indirectly addressing king Virat she said a lot to Yudhishtir like, "My eldest husband cannot tolerate any disturbance in his dice-game. It is because of this game that my very life has been choked out of me...if my respect for him lessens should he blame me for that?"(341). Is for common woman to say like this possible?

Conclusion

Draupadi is a challenge of womanhood. She has faced insult, mental and emotional dilemma even in the presence of wise, qualified and honorable men, not only this but also in the presence of her five husbands for the sake of their own dharma. The Mahabharat's Draupadi had no reaction to that. But Pratibhaji's Draupadi is not mute. If required she opens her mouth. She does not believe that husband is God and she should always obey him. She is full of women

consciousness. As a daughter or even as a wife she asks so many questions and declares doubts even regarding the dharma of a female on this earth to scholars. Thus Pratibhaji has tried her level best to present a Psychological picture of Krishana as a woman living a predicament-ridden life, full of variety.

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