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A Present Voice from the Past: Revisionist Mythmaking in Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*

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Revision is a feminist strategy of subverting patriarchal values. It can be a re-interpretation of the andocentric myths from the feminist angle. Women writers redefine women from the feminist perspective. They review the image of women which the patriarchy has popularized. They reconstruct them in the light of the real experiences of women. Feminists challenge the patriarchal construction of female identity. Revision is a fertile ground for reinterpretation. It is an attempt to retrieve female identity from the oppressive phallogocentric language. Many contemporary women writers have chosen to challenge well established myth structures. Myths have come down from history with fixed co-ordinates. It has an already defined and accepted meaning. When a writer appropriates the myth for other purpose, he/she is said to have revised the myth. Here, the Oriya writer Pratibha Ray appropriates the myth and assigns new meanings to suit her need in her well acclaimed novel *Yajnaseni*.

Revisionist myth making is exemplified in Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*. The Jnanapith award winner, Pratibha Ray refuses to accept traditional and idealistic approach in her work; rather she excavates the disturbed psyche of the ancient mythical heroine, Draupadi. Endowed with a critical thinking capacity, the writer raises her voice against social evils prevailing in the patriarchal society. Draupadi is a good vantage point from which to observe the depth and power of an oppressed woman. Denied justice by the male ruled society, Draupadi opens her true self through a letter to Krishna lying at the foothills of Himalaya at the end of her life. Draupadi reveals the underlying mysteries of the society and often explodes at the objectification of woman. Dharmaraj Yudhishtir said to Bhim, "Do not turn back to look! Come forward!"(3). With a pain of recognition, the fallen Draupadi tells in the letter to Krishna,

Those words shattered my heart. "I mused: how false is this bond between husband and 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)

Ray reworks the popular epic and recasts the myth from the feminist perspective. *Yajnaseni*, is definitely a feminist writing in which myths are revisioned, rewrote and retold from a female point of view. The focus of this novel is on the inner life of women. The inner spaces are reflected in detail. Ray makes a determined effort for the portrayal of the epic character Draupadi in her novel *Yajnaseni*. She brings to the surface the broader and deeper aspects of Draupadi's mind that lay submerged in the majestic sweep of the grand *Mahabharata*. Ray clubs all the three aspects of revision in *Yajnaseni*. In this re-vision of *Mahabharata*, the re-vision, re-interpretation and re-imaging occur simultaneously. In the feminist perspective, *Mahabharata* depicts women as a non-entity and totally subservient to man. The epic provides Ray, the context to challenge the patriarchal point of view, which moulds realities, fixes values and limits vision of individual possibilities. In *Yajnaseni*, Ray uses the mythical framework of *Mahabharata* to give voice to all silenced women. Ray,s

Draupadi is a well-groomed, princess Yajnaseni, born out of fire, intelligent and educated, beautiful and wise; she is forever bound by law—that is the law of submission. As a first person narrative, the story speaks of her marriage against her wishes to the five Pandavas. And yet she continues to respect and revere each one of them. In love with Krishna, she surrenders herself to his wishes and agrees to marry Arjuna. Ray's *Draupadi* tells her story and brings the trials and tribulations suffered by her. It is a story of a woman in love; a woman who sacrifices herself for the integrity of her family and people. But she gets little in return. Her life is offered in the form of a prayer to Krishna – her Sakha, her soul-mate. In the letter addressed to Krishna she voices her woes. In this regard, Helen Cixous remarks:

It is by writing, from and toward and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than silence. (875)

Ray subverts the traditional narrative and symbols that perpetuate male hegemony. *Draupadi* writes her agonies that she did suffer for preserving dharma. She thought that on the strength of her adherence to dharma and fidelity as wife she would be able to accompany her husbands to the heaven. Yet, she slipped and fell on the golden dust of Himalayan foothills. But nobody turned back to look at her, even Dharmaraj Yudhishtir, lord of righteousness.

Images of woman in Indian culture emerge mainly from the ancient epics. These epics exert a powerful impact on our modes of thoughts and feelings. A woman is depicted in a variety of ways in *Mahabharata*. However, it cannot be said that the *Mahabharata* is the exact representation of that period, or that it represents all the women of that period. The *Mahabharata* describes womanhood in all its complexity. They are the objects of a male dominated perception. They are the ways man has perceived woman. Ray looks at *Draupadi* from a woman's point of view. This image unravels a different and new facet of *Draupadi's* life.

Revision for Adrienne Rich, is “taking a second look” from a different perspective. Texts in the male canon are re-read with a view to exposing patriarchal or other unjust hierarchical practices and assumptions contained in them. Revisioning of accepted structures provide a context to woman writers to recast the traditional stories that misrepresent women and present alternative view. In *Yajnaseni*, Ray gives importance to *Draupadi's* point of view. She is the character who narrates her own life story. Revisioning may require re-imaging of one or more male defined characters in the myths. Re-imaging may in turn lead to the creation of a new character. Re-mything is an effective way to demolish the distorted image of women in religious writing. The hostile images of women moulded in religious tradition and ingrained in the consciousness of people should be destroyed according to the theory of revisionist mythmaking.

Re-visioning, in Alicia Ostriker's view, is like filling an old vessel with a new wine. Myth is a free form. So it is capable of alternate possibilities at the beginning, end and at every pause. The art of re-vision has multiple purposes. Ostriker remarks in *Stealing the Language*:

...Old stories are changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasy. Instead... they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered; (and) in some cases they are instructions for survival.(215)

Myths have always been a source of collective male fantasy. The message conveyed by logocentric texts provides a single perspective. Feminist writers deconstruct their writings and open possibilities for multiple perspectives or views. Traditional narratives and symbols that perpetuate male hegemony are deconstructed and the same material is rewritten. Feminist re-vision has become an effective context to look back for a re-survey in literature.

It is a re-view of discrimination and subordination on the basis of gender. In this regard Adrienne Rich observes:

Revision- the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text form a new critical direction is for women more that a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival. (90)

Ray looks back into the history with fresh eyes. She enters the old texts and tries to give new critical direction for her protagonist Draupadi. She wants to establish a point that Draupadi, the protagonist of *Yajnaseni* is a lady of flesh and blood with the ordinary feelings which every woman shows in their life. Ray creates an artificial situation to illustrate a psychological picture of Draupadi as a woman living a predicament-ridden life, full of variety. In the core narrative she merges imaginary situations. For instance, Ray mentions in the third chapter that Draupadi can write poems. She is being portrayed as an intelligent lady. Ved Vyas does not tell in *Mahabharata* that his heroine Draupadi is capable of writing poems.

In *Yajnaseni*, Draupadi-Krishnaa enjoys a special relationship with Krishna. That is seen not only in such dramatic confrontations, but also in unexpectedly delicate, understated interactions in *Mahabharata*. In Ray's retelling of Draupadi's story, Krishna advises her to marry Arjuna, his dear friend. Draupadi deliberately tries to forget that her father has first offered her to Krishna. She surrenders her wishes in front of Krishna, who exists as the image of patriarchal power. Ved Vyas illustrates Draupadi as the embodiment of submission to support the patriarchy at the time. In the hands of literary patriarchy, literature has become an effective tool to perpetuate male hegemony. They have created euphemistic myths to propagate male hegemony which shuts all the possibilities of self assertion and growth for women.

Draupadi realizes that marriage offers no happiness to her. In a patriarchally defined pattern of behaviour, to be feminine means to be weak. Independence is a male attribute here. Here, happiness is banned for women. Any sign of self assertion in woman is disgracing. It is offensive that woman has no say in the choice of her husband. Unwillingly, she lets herself to live with the four brothers of Arjun. She reminds us of the cunning male oppressors who emotionally manipulates women. In a patronizing manner Krishna pins her down to his motive of preserving dharma leaving no way to escape. Literally, Krishna the symbol of male hegemony imprisons her emotionally. She has no choice but to obey male authority. Draupadi is driven into marriage. In patriarchal belief, women instigate misfortune and disaster. Man always tries to subjugate the potential power derived from her reproductive capacities with his virile sexuality. Ray revisions the myth through Draupadi's narrative. She takes off out attention from Draupadi's feminine qualities to her realities. Draupadi is not just a princess with colorful image. She is the symbol of an ordinary lady of emotion, struggling to survive in such a pathetic condition. Anger, hurt, self-esteem, mortification all are chocked in her.

Under the guise of mythical fantasy, Ray tells the realities of female agony in a very realistic mode. She reinterprets the familiar image of Yajnaseni in an entirely different perspective. She uses this mythical figure as a cover for writing in an unconventional way. In the original epic Draupadi seems powerful. Vyas failed to recognize the pain of a female who is compelled to live and surrender herself to five men. Ray finds the tale an irresistible target for revision. She attacks both the patriarchally moulded image of woman and the patriarchal culture that supports it. Her artistic insight transforms the lady into the victimized woman.

Draupadi, as Ray portrays her, is a victim of patriarchal society. The famous disrobing scene is important to bring out this point. Draupadi is forcibly brought into the court, a space dominated by men. Dushashana drags her and pulls her hair and brings her in front of all the members of the court. Status of a prostitute and a slave is accorded to her. And in the

discourse of man she has no right to ask or question this status. Here Draupadi's outrage is clearly pictured in Ray's version. She thinks about her five husbands who stacked her and having handed her over to others. Polyandry makes her an easy target in public. She refuses to plead for mercy. This is an affront to male sexuality and power. Draupadi demands justice and gets silence in return. What becomes apparent in the entire episode is that woman is merely an object and a possession. And the state too can do little to protect her from the shame and loss. Law and the so-called Dharma, legal system, fail to protect her. The mythological Draupadi had Krishna as her saviour. Ray's Draupadi too is saved by Krishna from complete humiliation.

As a significant attempt to write herself, Ray's Draupadi provides a rich discourse on women's speech. Women are supposed to be weaklings to be subordinated, protected and always controlled. Men emotionally blackmail them through love and marriage and force them into passivity. Draupadi controls herself before the injustice done by her favourite husband Arjun. She has been waiting for Arjun who went to the forest and making preparations for his return. Ray draws a pathetic picture of Draupadi :

Waiting, especially waiting for the beloved – how delightful it is! I was decorating Phalguni's room I was decorating his garden, His library, sitting room... I decked myself lie a Virgin bride. Let not Phalguni feel that twelve Years had gone by and that I had grown older by twelve years. (197)

Draupadi is a representative of the female in a patriarchal society who is found into passivity. She cannot protest against her husband's deeds without considering her emotions. Arjun brings a new bride Subhadra, Krishna's sister. She has been forced to give up the newly built mansion for the new bride. Arjun does not ask Draupadi's permission for his marriage. She becomes a symbol of "every woman", a helpless victim in the patriarchal world of oppression. Ray shifts her heroine from the object position to the subject position from where she speaks to the readers.

Revision is also an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction of bringing into being enabling alternatives. Thus feminist rewriting of myth proves to be a constructive deconstruction. In *Yajnaseni*, Ray creates characters who defy conventions. She brings a new character Maya as the maid of Draupadi as a device to understand the inner conflicts of Draupadi. In several areas this particular character helps her to overcome several problems in her life journey. She stays constantly by Draupadi like her shadow. At every step she seems as her helper. In order to give importance to this character Ray consciously brings many circumstances.

In the patriarchal social system a woman who wishes and tries to shape her personality as a human being is scorned at. An aggressive woman is always perceived as a threat to man's power and superiority. A woman who denies her femininity has to accept the disapproval of man and society. Either she has to be like other women, or else she has no place in the society. The patriarchal social system has laid down the sanctioned ways of expressing womanhood. A woman should live as daughter, wife, mother or as a prostitute. Draupadi questions the injustice which was done by Pandavas with full of anguish and anger:

Was woman merely man's movable or 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 lights over this body of mine, did it mean they could do as they wished with me? (235).

Man deprives woman of her human rights and then pretends to give her everything by making her the queen of his heart. He assures her that she will get everything desirable in life by surrendering herself to the husband. At the same time, he cannot fulfil the womanhood. The crux of womanhood lies in the blind acceptance of the inequality imposed on the woman. This shows that there is a hierarchical ordering of man and woman. A woman has to

complement and help man. But Draupadi desires an independent life of her own. She even dares to admire Karna who retains Dharma even during the Kurukshetra war where her husbands and even Krishna played treacherous games in the name of Dharma.

Pratibha's revision of the popular epic *Mahabharata* is a feminist endeavour to revalue women's experiences in patriarchy. She examines power relation in our culture. She speaks for all women who have lost their energy, creativity and power in a male-centred culture. The characters of *Mahabharata* are reconstructed in such a way that they have something gruesome to share with the readers. *Yajnaseni* discusses the history of women's oppression in a male dominated culture. She exposes the patriarchal myths and shows how women's life has been designed for them. In *Yajnaseni*, Ray portrays patriarchy's mode of oppressing women. She portrays the emotional turmoil. By re-mitigating her story attempts have been made to relocate some important issues pertaining to women's movement in writing and its style of transmission. She sketches divine Draupadi's helplessness, agony, struggle and even surrender. *Yajnaseni* is the story of *Mahabharata* narrated from the perspective of Draupadi, one of the most important but overlooked characters of Indian mythology. Draupadi fights against injustice in every possible way, while existing in a male-dominated society. She is the embodiment of woman's pride, sharp intellect and strong will. Draupadi speaks at the end of the Dvapara Yuga. In the form of a letter she is placing everything in front of her lord, Krishna. The novel itself is in the form of an autobiography. Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* is an unwritten history of the world of women.

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