

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

*December 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-VI*

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## Yajnaseni: A Synonym of Indian Woman

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यत्र नार्यःस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः ।

यत्र एताः तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्र अफलाः क्रियाः ॥

-मनुस्मृति

(Transliteration: *Yatra naryastu pujiyante ramante tatra devata/ Yatra etāh tu na pujiyante sarvasttra aphaalāh krtiyāh<sup>1</sup>*)

[Translation: Women are honored where divinity blossoms; wherever women are dishonored, all action, no matter how noble, remain unfruitful.]

Indian tradition has been considered unique in many aspects. It is said to be different with respect to its association of day-to-day lifestyle and professional life with philanthropy. It has awarded highest regard to a woman considering her a mother, who is regarded as the epitome of purity and inviolability. India has always had a special place for women in almost every ritualistic practice in the society. A woman is free to take part in any spiritual and social service unlike many cultures in the society. And women from time immemorial have exhibited their dynamic energy, devout efforts and committed service for their family, society and every other field where they received an opportunity or platform to perform. Indian aesthetics, philosophy and tradition have expounded various qualities of women.

The ultimate reality is one and the world of beings is its manifestations. The Upanishads declare that “*ekam sat vipraha bahuda vadanti*” (There is but only one reality in this world). Man and woman are the two manifestations of one supreme power. The refinement of man and woman marks the essence of civilization. They appear different in form and function, but the fact remains that they are equal in strength, power and disposition. Yet they are different and unique in their own capacity. It is in the opposite gender, where one finds one’s end or fulfilment. This unique relationship is manifested in

ancient Indian philosophy as two distinct forces— *Shiva* and *Shakti*, or *purusha* and *prakriti*. *Purusha* is the dynamic force or the energy while *prakriti* is the gross/active matter and the epitome of *ādhār* or the ultimate base. It is in their union that the very evolution has taken place. Philosophically the doctrine of evolution has great significance in inter relating matter, life, mind and spirit. In Indian mythology, *Shiva* and *Shakti* are represented as two sides of the same divinity. Hence there is a beautiful depiction of this union as *ardha nārishwara* —half man and half woman, which is a union of both.

However these lines in one of the ancient texts of India sound sarcastic in the present milieu. Plight of women seems to be an integral aspect of human civilization, magnified in Indian sub-continent. In fact, a woman, who is instrumental in bringing about not only the process of procreation but also in many altruistic services in a family and society, has always been among the deprived and under-represented class of the society apart from being an accepted prey to the nonchalant injustice/deprivation enthused by her family and society overall. A practice, which connects all the ages since centuries, is unfortunately prevalent in India and other parts of the globe amidst worldwide dissent against gender discrimination. In India, societal system preferably prescribes patriarchal structure where the privileged sex, the male, gets the right to take important decisions and significant steps to steer either the family or the society in a whole. As a result, birth of a male child is still considered auspicious and the birth of a girl child is often held ominous in many sections of the society. An increase in the number of male child is a much coveted possession in a family. Almost from her inception, a girl is assigned specific roles, responsibilities, duties and rights, since her first consciousness that governs the inner wheel of a family. In nut shell, it should be better labeled as ‘domestic affairs’. Depending on the age group a girl belongs to, assignment of job differs, and later her marital status shapes her destiny. It would therefore not be unfair to conclude that plight of a woman begins from her birth. Whatever a woman/girl does, is the fruit of the decision taken by someone else for her. Dose of moral lessons or sense of good act or bad act is injected in a girl’s blood, in optimum proportion which varies from place to place and culture to culture, to condition her mind right from her babyhood days. Thus, a girl child gets conditioned to subjugation at every level since her tender years. It would be an incomplete observation if the conditioning process of a male child is left untouched. Well, a small boy is also trained how to discriminate based on the gender factor. Innocently one male child seeks extra care and attention when compared to his female siblings in a family. For example, a boy is taught to understand right from his childhood days that kitchen is a den for his mother, sister and later his wife, and his destination is somewhere away from manufacturing comfort and pleasure for family members. Although this sounds very feminist, it is a fact that Indian societal condition still broods on issues related to kitchen and other domestic affairs. This might be one of the strong reasons why TV soaps based on this theme reap immense popularity.

Distorted pictures of gender bias are reflected in the human-designed mythological world. Fables, parables, allegories— all surrounded with the stories of Gods and deities, even reflect gender discrimination. The epoch making story of temptation for the forbidden apple between Adam and Eve is also craftily designed. Eve is deliberately portrayed as the primary culprit having been fallen into the trap of Satan. Almost all the epoch making

*magnum opus* of literary legends portray woman/women as the root of every catastrophe. In Hinduism, the images of the Gods and Goddesses like Shree Vishnu and Lakshmi, Brahma and Saraswati, Shiva and Parvati, are portrayed as the replica of the society. Goddesses are sketched as delicate deities, sitting on the swan or Lotus, serving their consorts or simply sitting beside and valourizing them for their gallantry. Women deities are portrayed as the ideal partners of the most powerful universal forces. Indian epics like The Ramayana and The Mahabharata are also not unscathed from portrayal of gender discrimination. Female consorts are portrayed as an epitome of sacrifice and tolerance. Female protagonists/characters like Sita and Yajnaseni were forced to withstand humiliation, undue hardship and injustice in the name of dharma. In fact, under-representation of women is not as much a matter of concern as compared to the distorted illustration of women. Unfortunately irrespective of all round developments human nature falls a prey to the basic instincts, i.e., control over the weaker section of the society. Certain physical limitations of women have been molested by men for ages in order to retain the reign of supremacy. However one must not be oblivious of the fact that some of the awakened male reformers immensely contributed for the emancipation of women. It was a Himalayan task for these reformers to fight against this social evil amidst conditioned men and women guided by opportunists of the society.

This paper, which is primarily based on the novel written by Pratibha Ray, a renowned novelist and academician of Odisha, depicts the plight of women in the society. The paper highlights the aspects that meticulously reflect the deplorable state of women since the time immemorial and relate with the contemporary scenario. Yajnaseni or Draupadi still exists and survives in the heart of almost every woman in Indian sub-continent, and is the main concern of the author of Yajnaseni. The paper highlights plight of woman in the society that has been a universal malice for millennia, and how each woman irrespective of her social status and age co-relates with this social subjugation, much unattended and ignored.

Yajnaseni, one of the female protagonists of the great Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*, emerged out of an altar in order to avenge her father's insult. That she would embark upon *dharma* by playing the role of a catalyst in wiping out the ruling class kshatriya-s, was prophesised during her birth.

“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, kshatriya-s will be destroyed. She will be the destroyer of the Kauravas” (Ray, Yajnaseni, 8).

Yajnaseni, an epitome of prejudice and untold suffering, has been known for her intrepid actions taken to fight against the evil. Although she was subjected to sufferings, insults and injustices in several occasions beginning with her compulsion to enter into the world of polyandry, she did not lose hope to start afresh. She was consoled by Lord Krishna Himself along with other elderly persons to pacify herself in order to let the 'greater cause' ensue through her. She was meant to be instrumental in accomplishing a greater service towards humanity; that she was divinely chosen to be a catalyst to ascertain dharma on the earth. Yajnaseni, an epitome of compromise, is hitherto considered a

polyandrous female and label as 'Mahabhaaratii', 'a great wife of five descendants of Bharata'. Everyone seems to look at her in abhorrence by the thought of a female leading her marital life with her five husbands. But Yajnaseni remained unheard. She neither found any congenial opportunity to express her grief/inner voice nor could she prefer to be vocal. Yajnaseni, a novel written by Pratibha Ray, is a narration of The Mahabharata retold from a woman's point of view. The atrocities of Yajnaseni have not only been reflected in this story but also carry with the real life connection between mythology and reality. This connection has made the novel impressive and appealing.

Injustice and discrimination in the name of gender ironically are still prevalent since the time immemorial. Discrimination in the name of gender has been an inevitable aspect of the patriarchal society and depriving women in every aspect of life has been quite obvious. In the 20th or 21st century, when there are discourses on women empowerment, the chapter of exploitation remaining the same indicated the ironical state of womanhood. Krishnaa, being an archetype of Indian women has been projected as one of the most tormented females in *The Mahabharata*. However, the projection of such atrocity is not confined only to Draupadi. Although a princess, Sita suffered atrocities throughout her life. As a victim of social stigma in the then days, her voice remained unheard. She discharged her duty as a wife and thus accompanied her husband to the exile for 14 long years discarding palatial luxuries. However, her chastity got questioned by her own husband Shree Rama. Without any retaliation she proved successful in the 'purity' test not asking in return for a similar chastity test for her husband too. Like Draupadi and Sita, voice of the women gets suppressed in the male dominated society. Draupadi and Sita are merely not the mythological characters but vibrant characters whom one witnesses in almost every house.

Although we live in a patriarchal society, it cannot be concluded that only male members are solely responsible for any atrocity upon a woman. The irony is that at times a woman also stands responsible for the agony of another woman. Draupadi was an incomparable beauty in her brimming youth. When she was waiting for her dream lover, the thought of Krishna, the finest man of Aryavarta was infused in her mind. While she was dreaming of Krishna, the finest man himself shattered her dream and she was provided with an option of choosing someone as fine, as strong and as attractive as Krishna in the form of the third Pandava and Krishna's cousin Arjun. After the swayamvar, when Krishnaa accompanied with the Pandava-s, arrived before her mother in law (Kunti), she was considered as an object and was asked to be equally shared among the five Pandava-s. Kunti, though a woman, was more concerned to make her words true than to protect the honor and shame of her daughter-in-law. Another illustration can also be cited where again a woman plays a pivotal role in being the cause of agony of her daughters-in-law. Not only the protagonist herself but two other princesses of The Mahabharata, Ambika and Ambalika were also forced by their mother in law in the name of dharma to beget sons from other men to preserve their dynasty. "(For) the preservation of dynasty, Ambika and Ambalika were virtually forced to beget sons by other men. ... Their mother in law Satyawati says, "if a woman cannot have son by her husband, there are eight methods by which she can beget a son. And this is accepted by the society. Among these, one way is begetting a son by another man" (Ray, 97).

Usually an Indian woman never puts forth her likes and dislikes before her husband or in-laws. Indian tradition, as mentioned above, conditions a woman to compromise her life based on the needs of the male counterpart. She toils hard to satisfy her husband, children and other members of the family. Many a time she keeps her desires and inquisitions suppressed at the cost of her bubbling desire to live life. Her goal in life becomes ensuing and maintaining peace in the family. A woman is not empowered to ask or charge her husband if he does anything erroneous, rather, she is answerable to everyone in the family and society in a whole. She is considered as someone who is the epitome of cooperation and an instrument to satisfy her consort in every respect. Indian woman is known for her *tyāg* or perennial sacrifice. She is often subjected to brutal mental/physical torture whenever and wherever she fails to meet people's expectation. From the discussion of the elderly persons like Kunti, Yudhishtir, Vyasadev and Arjun, in *The Mahabharata*, it was clear that no one ever wanted to take the share of moral blame and eventually it was Draupadi who had fallen a prey to societal malice in the name of gender discrimination. Arjun, the real husband of her, too wanted her to be shared by all five brothers. "(We) shall all enjoy the princess equally" (Yajnaseni, 59). Krishna, the finest man of Aryavarta, when asked to resolve the situation, he justified the statement of Yudhishtir by saying,

"Whoever has seen Krishnaa once – how can he rest without getting her? There is a chance of fratricidal strife breaking out in future among the five Pandavas. ... Considering all these matters and for preserving Dharma of everyone and to establish Dharma on earth Yudhishtir had created such a situation. ... So for maintaining unity among the five Pandavas, Yudhishtir has thought of making Krishnaa the wife of all of them" (Ray, 61-62).

After listening to everyone, Krishnaa had nothing to say except agreeing with everyone by accepting five husbands and take the blame forever. It is popularly believed that if everything was left to Krishnaa, then why didn't she protest or at least reflect her mind? The fact is, she could have denied when she had got an opportunity to take a decision. But she didn't because she knew that in doing so she would further complicate her societal status. Moreover, the discretion given was more ornamental than real. She knew that in doing so she would end up taking blame from her husband, mother in law, brothers in law and above all would become an instrument to break the unity among the Pandava-s. There was also a chance that Arjun, her dream lover, who was so much devoted towards his mother and brothers, would have discarded her. In the hope of getting Arjun along with other Pandava-s, she agreed with all but what did she get ultimately? Neither did she get Arjun completely nor her decision and action was recognized by anyone.

During her lifetime, a female is supposed to wear several hats— of a daughter, sister, wife, mother, etc, and each role is supposed to be justified to the most. A male member, on the other hand, acts as the pillar of a house and the woman is like cement that joins each brick for its strength. She acts as a nurse and care taker who binds everyone with the other. But her service goes unrecognized. Perhaps for Krishnaa it was role shift in every year to act as the wife of a different person that made her existence a painful enigma. Her

inundated in complexity is difficult to construe even now. While playing the role of wife of one of the five brothers, she was supposed to treat the others, the four brothers, like a mother or a sister towards who were otherwise her husband at different point of time. All five Pandava brothers were of five different natures and Krishnaa was the only common string that could fasten them together. For Yudhishtir, she was a sentinel of dharma, for Bhim she was a good cook, nay chef, for Arjun, a wise companion, for Nakul, a good caretaker of animals and for Sahadev, she was a great poet. Arjun felt hurt and mocked at Krishnaa for her consent to abide by his mother's ordain, but he did not delve deep into the heart of Krishnaa to feel what she really wanted in her life. He fell a prey to the social stigma prevalent in those days.

The supremacy of strong over the deprived and underprivileged has been a prevalent practice in the society nay nature in a whole. Women being the fairer sex, in other words, 'weaker' section of the society are persistently subjugated by males. Due to this prevalent practice men have always tried to feel triumphant by abusing, insulting or physically hampering a woman. Woman has been an instrument of entertainment and a machine of procreation. A valiant person like Karna too did not let a single chance to slip when it came to affront Krishnaa. He had been insulted in several occasions and by several persons due to his birth and blood. But instead of replying those royal personnel, he always insulted Krishnaa as if she is solely responsible for his suffering. His manhood and prowess were shown in hurting and insulting a female whose fault was simply to accept her father's condition for the *swayamvar* and being silent in her brother's mockery towards Karna. Not only Karna but her husbands also were no less responsible for the historical humiliation. Draupadi was the 'heroine' of five heroes and it was her duty to take care of them and accompany them everywhere. The irony was, despite having five husbands, everyone failed to read her feelings. Arjun always blamed her for accepting five husbands; Bhim considered her as a priced possession and Yudhishtir regarded her as someone propitious whose very presence brought them good fortune. She did not receive honor and respect of a wife from anyone among the Pandava-s.

A society that forces a woman to enter into polyandry also goes to the extent of accusing her as a harlot. Krishna, the finest man of Aryavarta had eight chief queens. Besides them, he also had thousands of other concubines. During twelve years of exile, Arjun himself was married to several princesses like Ulupi, Arya, Chitrangada, etc. with Krishna's darling sister Subhadra simply to have the support and help of their kingdom during the Kurukshetra war. But no one had ever pointed fingers towards Krishna or Arjun, instead humiliated Draupadi at every step. After accepting thousands of wife, if Krishna was considered as a savior, then why not Krishnaa in accepting five husbands, be considered as a guard of dharma!

In many occasions, a female is brutally treated by her husband due to some trivial reason, which mostly is related to infringement of some instruction/restrictions posed by the husband. In the Indian context, husbands are considered God and the wives are expected to obey and worship them. Krishnaa could foresee the impending danger behind the invitation of Duryodhan for the dice game and requested Yudhishtir to turn down the proposal. But Yudhishtir's male ego rejected the plea of a female and the invitation was

accepted. In the dice game, along with the property, Krishnaa was also staked by the lord of dharma Yudhishtir and was lost. Although, a husband has all rights over his wife, still he should have sought her consent before staking her. Moreover, she had other four husbands too. Neither did he take their permission nor of Krishnaa. In every era Gods and Goddesses take incarnation to establish dharma and peace on earth but Draupadi was no Goddess. Then why did an ordinary woman become a ploy in the hands of Krishna for this job?

Moitreyee Chatterjee says, “A woman’s physical chastity is a matter of protection and it has to be protected by the family. So the best way to dishonor a family is to go for the women. That is why we have found that upper class landlords raped lower caste women who are working for them. In the police station you will find the police raping women who are in their custody”. To show their hegemony over Pandava-s, the Kaurava-s went for their wife. Draupadi, though going through an impure phase and in a single cloth, was mercilessly dragged by Duhshasan to the Kuru court and was stripped before the elderly erudite persons and courtesans. Krishna consoled her by saying,

“Krishnaa, your anger and vow are just. Those who insulted you, those who looked upon you with lustful eyes in the open assembly, who encouraged sin – all of them will be laid low on the battle field by the arrows of your husband, Phalguni. ... The heavens may fall, the Himalayas may sink into Patala, the sun and the moon may collapse, the earth may split into a hundred pieces, but your vow shall be fulfilled. ... Sakhi, do not grieve. What I say always comes true” (Ray, 252).

But were these few words of comfort sufficient for a female to forget this misdemeanor? Can a woman stay content and forget everything even if the convicts are punished? What kind of prowess was it if a woman had to be staked in order to establish dharma? Was it justice done by Lord Krishna and the lord of dharma, Yudhishtir? Several such questions have remained unanswered. The words of Krishna came true and the Kuru dynasty was destroyed. Once again Draupadi was blamed for being a reason for the war and the annihilation of the Kaurava-s. But no one ever remembered the injustice made to her throughout life.

Krishnaa is the most misunderstood character of The Mahabharata. Her devotion and respect for Krishna and Karna has also been misconstrued. Dr. Pratibha Ray aptly says that there is no such woman who can stay away from a valiant hero like Krishna. Krishnaa, from her very birth has been exploited in several ways. Her birth itself was for a specific purpose, i.e. the establishment of dharma. She let herself exploited every time till the end of her life. She was scorned by Karna and others as a harlot due to her acceptance of five husbands. But was she really responsible for it? It was true that she had encouraged her husbands to break out a war against the Kaurava-s and laid them down. Her vindictive pursuit led her to provoke her husbands to defeat the Kaurava-s in the war. However, she was not the only reason of the war. From the very childhood days, Pandava-s tolerated injustice inflicted upon them by the Kaurava-s, and their tolerance crossed its limit with the slur of Krishnaa in the royal court before the elderly and erudite personnel.



Krishnaa is just not a mere woman but an embodiment of knowledge, wisdom, affection and power. It is not that she lived only in the *Dvaparayuga*, she still exists quite alive in every woman of every age. During the last moment of her life she expresses her wishes before Krishna. One of her wishes is, “I do not want *moksha* or salvation. I do not want to reach *svarg* in this body – not even liberation. It is rebirth that I crave” (Ray, 397). This wish of her has been granted by Shree Krishna and in *Kaliyug*, Krishnaa has taken birth in every family. Everyday she is being stripped and raped, and now no more restricted to the royal courts only. Neither out of choice nor for any compulsion she might accept certain conditions imposed by the society, but Duhshasan-s, in every age, has not failed to strip off her, an embodiment of Draupadi. Draupadi asked for rebirth just to rectify her mistakes of *Dvaparayuga*; but whenever she took birth on this earth, every time she became a prey to lusty Duhshasans. She has established dharma in the *Dvaparayuga* but her wish to bring peace on earth has remained unfulfilled till today.

Being a woman novelist, Dr. Ray’s stories revolve round women protagonists. She has characterized women of every strata of the society as a ploy in the hands of men. Somewhere they are exploited by their lovers, somewhere by husbands and at some other places by the patriarchal society. Throughout the novel, the story revolves around female subjugation and helplessness in a dystopian society steered by a section of powerful privileged men.

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