Re-Representation of Mahabharata’s Draupadi in Pratibha Ray’s
Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi

Neetika
Research Scholar
Department of English
Hp University Shimla

Abstract:
In the contemporary literary scenario the epic Mahabharata holds a position of reverence and the various “re-writings” of the epic is testimony to the fact that people in different regions of India are making an ongoing effort to reinterpret the epic to elicit deeper meaning and insights from the epic. It presents a realistic picture of a man’s struggle and his heroism against odds that makes it a suitable material for rewriting new fiction. The tendency to write new tales has been instrumental in recreating the tales of the great epic that have a universal and timeless appeal. The relevance of it to the contemporary society is underlined by the fact that the characters from the epics have infilterated Indian psyche to such an extent that they have become reference points for people in their day to day lives.

Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi is a re-writing of the events of the Mahabharata, related to the life of its central female figure Draupadi, accounted by herself at the time of her death, highlighting the somberness of her life as a woman, where at every step she is used as an object by men to suit their designs. She is an epic heroine whose predicaments and sufferings seem endless. Despite making all compromises in her polyandrous marriage, no one around her bothered to empathise with her. Born of sacrificial altar, true to her appellations, Yajnaseni throughout life burns in the fire of men’s lust and her actions, reactions cause burning in others. Ray draws on the element of irony relating to Yajnaseni’s position as well as predicament. Yajnaseni is a deeply wronged woman, all decisions about her are taken by others without ever taking her token approval. Everyone right from gods, her father, mother-in-law, husbands use her like a bait to achieve something for themselves, she has no freedom to think of her own preferences, and when she raises a voice of protest against such a treatment, she is labeled an avenger.

Ray’s Yajnaseni represents the universal suffering womanhood but unlike Sita she interrogates her position as a wife and the individual rights as a human being and thus makes an apparent distinction from the archetypal image of a silent suffering woman. Even in the gambling game, her strength of character is clearly exhibited when instead of crying she dares to ascertain her legal position in such a way that she is often called Pandita and Brahmavadini. Thus the research paper intends to explore the hidden feelings and anguish of Draupadi by assessing the Yajnaseni of Pratibha Ray.

Keywords: Mahabharata, Draupadi, Pandwas, Pratibha Ray’s Yajnaseni, Sabha Parva, Pandita
Introduction

Epic literature, with close bearing on the moral values, ethos and beliefs of society is of paramount significance. Epic stories have always been an integral part of any culture and as such are capable of generating interest of the learned as well as of the illiterate. In the recent past there has been a revival of the mythological themes in literature, theatre and television serials inculcating a new interest in the epics and its characters.

On the whole the living literary tradition like the Mahabharata, performs the dual function of recreation and reinterpretation of Indian society. Every period of social transformation tends to dig in this vast storehouse of knowledge for understanding the eras gone by and also for understanding the contemporary society.

The story of epic and its characters reflect life and its conundrum in various hues and this is why even today people faced with analogous issues of conflicts find the dictum of dharma preached in the Mahabharata quite convincing. Each character whether high or poor, women or men experience suffering and encounter subsequent alienation and try to overcome it with the dictum of dharma. Indian literature of twentieth century has been marked by a search for meaning of "being" and a quest for modernity but still keeping relation intact with the heritage and culture; a new interpretation of myths has emerged that has focused on ‘out of reach’ characters. Modern Indian writers including males and females have endeavoured to give a human perspective to many mythical characters to understand them from a psychoanalytical perspective.

Pratibha Ray’s Yajnaseni, Chitra Banerjee Divakruni's The Palace of Illusion, Mahasweta Devi’s “Breast stories”, S. L. Byrappa’s Parva, M. T. Vasudeven’ Nair’s Second Turn, Gajendra Kumar Mitra’s novel in Bengali, Mritunjaya (Triumph over Death) by Shivaji Sawan, are some examples of epic re-writings. In Indian cinema also there are several film versions of the epic dating back to 1920s. The internationally acclaimed Bengali film director Satyajit Ray directed the epic film. In 1980s the Mahabharata television serial, directed by Ravi Chopra, was shown on India’s national channel. In western world also, a well known presentation of the epic is Peter Brook's play premiered in Avignon in 1985, and its five hour movie version was The Mahabharata (1989). The Mahabharata has also been re-interpreted by Shashi Tharoor in The Great Indian Novel and by Shyam Benegal in Kalyug.

All these reconstructed literary works have been instrumental in creating awareness of the angst of some characters, more specifically of the female characters, who have found a new voice through these reinterpretations and surprisingly these characters have acquired a new understanding.

Female characters are represented as worshipping husbands as gods, but Draupadi, epic heroine is cast in a different mould. She is presented as a woman with courage to question the dominating patriarchal set up, thus she subverts the discourse of enslavement thereby exploring her identity as a living being.

The research work aims to focus on one of the most important characters of the Mahabharata, Draupadi - born from the sacrificial altar as an unasked child, who is shared by five husbands, survives to preserve dharma on earth throughout her life, bereft of desires and rights. She is accused of being partial towards Arjuna and thus forfeits her claim to Heaven. The study intends to critique the predicament faced by Draupadi, presenting the inner turmoil that she has to undergo in life. Pratibha Ray
opines: "She resents, rejects and invokes in the process of challenging the male ego to epitomic height of the female courage" (Ray, Introduction ii).

Vyasa in the Mahabharata presents Draupadi as the most accomplished woman, endowed with extraordinary beauty, whose beauty becomes the cause of her sufferings. She is presented as an avenger who challenges the patriarchal norms and declares the destruction of Kuru dynasty for humiliating a helpless woman in Sabha. Pratibha Ray further states:

Draupadi is the challenge of womanhood, the embodied form of action, knowledge, devotion and power. Such a woman who faced torment, insult, mental and emotional dilemma has not yet been born on the earth. (Ray, Afterward 400)

Thus Draupadi is a woman who has been subjugated by lust crazed men, her own husbands, and comes out as victor by realizing her “being” and thereby acts as model for the contemporary women. Her anguish is the anguish of an ordinary woman in any society and in questioning the male dominated society, she has very valiantly tried to give voice to countless women across the world to raise a cry of protest when it crosses the limits of tolerance. She delineates a way to deal with injustice inflicted upon women by protesting against the injustice, gaining strength from the cultural traditions by identifying the points of strength and to use them creatively to combat anti woman ideas.

Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni represents a woman with unending circle of sufferings and predicaments. She epitomises stri shakti and rebels against the society where woman is used as a vehicle to suit the choice of males, any time, any where. She questions what real dharma is? And thus makes all the so called preservers of dharma speechless in Kuru court Pratibha Ray explores Draupadi’s unending circle of sufferings in presenting two contradictory sides of her personality: one is her shanti swroop – which tolerates and accepts all odds of life in the name of dharma; other is her shakti swroop – which raises voice against the humiliations and torments that devoid her of the basic human right as a living being. In the Mahabharata she questions the relevance of her unending sufferings while conversing with Krishna:

“I am the daughter of king Drupada and sister to Dhrishtadyumna, king Pandu's daughter-in-law and the crowned queen of the five Pandvas; I am also the mother of the heroic Upa Pandvas; and yet what insults have I had to bear!” (126)

Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni displays courage in challenging and questioning the male dominated practices that render women helpless. She maintains silence and even in her silence she keeps thinking and questioning her predicament. “Tolerance is the ornament of women. But to bear injustice with bowed head is not dharma of woman. If the husband adopts the wrong path and the wife remains quiet, then everyone will suffer.” (251)

Yajnaseni personifies daring disposition, strong will power, intellectual mind and never yielding attitude. Born of sacrificial altar, Draupadi is described in Yajnaseni, as an unparalleled beauty with:

Thick hair like the waves of the ocean and large entrancing blue lotus like eyes, radiant with intelligence!
Born unasked and unexpected, she is offered, unasked at the feet of Krishna like an oblation. It exhibits that "Women have no desires of their own but the one put in their heart by fathers, husbands and sons" (90). Yajnaseni's beauty becomes the root cause of her sufferings. Pandva brothers are infatuated with her beauty and are desperate to have her as wife.

Yajnaseni's marriage to all five Pandvas one by one and consummation of each has been sensitively handled by Pratibha Ray. She marries all the Pandvas taking vow every time, "with body, mind and speech I am yours, only yours … Thrice do I say. This is the truth" (69). After performing the marriage she "entered/bathed in the very hot fire that gave birth to her, and emerged again, with full black hair, a chaste body like north star … in this way the other four married her" (1.5-96). Yajnaseni resolves to allow Pandvas to share her body but her mind and her heart are her own. The Pandvas can have authority over her body but she offers her soul to Arjuna only. Pratibha Ray's Yajnaseni contradicts such preoccupied notions and gives an example of Sita from the Ramayana, who is not forced to marry all the brothers of Rama to avoid the uncertain assumptions of future. She poignantly asks:

Was Sita not beautiful? But she did not have to marry all the brothers of Ram to maintain unity among them. (61)

Yajnaseni accepts this polyandrous marriage just to preserve dharma and sacrifices her life, her desires and dreams, and offers herself as an oblation. What she procures from this polyandrous marriage is a life full of suffering, insults and humiliations. She has five husbands to share her beauty but no one to protect and support her. Yajnaseni after marriage undergoes such insults every now and then. Pratibha Ray depicts her pained tolerance at piercing comments and lustful remarks of Kaurvas being in polyandrous marriage, but none of her husbands ever notices her discomfort or consoles her. The solitude and loneliness of Yajnaseni, tormented by lust crazed Kaurvas, is powerfully presented by Pratibha Ray, which is kept aside in the Mahabharata. She is alone with her sufferings and there is nobody to listen to her or console her, pitifully she says:

My body wanted rest, my mind wanted consolation, and patience. I had five husbands, but none was forthcoming from anyone. (135)

In her sufferings, she finds tears to be her only companion, to soothe her enervated senses:

Tears, though suppressed, would flow. These tears were not the molten form of agony, not born of the pain of insult, nor emerging from physical weariness. They had sprung from the helplessness and loneliness. (138)

Arjuna whom she loves more than other four brothers, never understands her In the Afterward of Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi, Pratibha Ray states:

Such a woman who faced torments, insults, mental and emotional dilemma like Yajnaseni not yet born on this earth. (Ray, Afterword 400)
The darker chapter of her life is her humiliation in *SabhaParva*, where she is treated like an object, sacrificed at the altar of kingdom. Yudhishtra stakes her as his last belonging in the dice game. Vyasa in the *Mahabharata* also depicts the helplessness of a woman who is dragged to the court menstruating, wearing single garment. Highlighting her pathetic situation, she laments:

> Leave me alone! What will they say? There are elders and learned men in the hall. Look at my condition! To drag me in my period before a crowd of men … It is shameful, where is dharma of Kurus? (Lal 133)

But Dushasana drags her even harder and mercilessly replies: "It matters very little whether you are in menses or having only one cloth or none at all. You have become a bond-slave pledged in dice (Narar 58).

Yajnaseni realizes that all the so called great men, her husbands, other people sitting in the *Sabha* are cowards and can not defend a helpless woman. She stops praying for help and seeks justice as a living being from king, whose foremost duty is to provide justice to all his subjects. She asserts: “I do not beg anyone for pity, I demand justice. To protect the honour of woman is dharma of king. Then does it befit the Kuru kings to insult the bride of their own clan? (238)

It is *Sabha Parva* that jolts her completely and she takes control of her life after this traumatic episode in her life. Hereafter she empowers herself and challenges the Kuru dynasty.

The final tragedy of her life is in her desertion by her husbands during their *mahaprasthana*, that is their last journey to heaven through the Himalayan slopes and resultantly she dies alone. Owing to her adherence to *dharma* and fidelity as a wife she assumes that she is going to accompany her husbands to heaven, but she falls on the way and no one turns back even to look at her. Yudhishtra, lord of righteousness, tells Bhima not to turn and come forward. These words shatter her heart and she starts introspecting her relationship with the Pandvas. The bond between husband and wife thus proves false. Affection, love, sacrifice and surrender, all seem to vanish at that very moment. Draupadi lying on the death bed contemplates:

> Men and women of Kaliyuga will laugh scornfully saying, if with five husbands Draupadi would be a Sati then what is the fidelity of one husband? (4)

Yajnaseni is an epic heroine who despite all her sufferings, reconnoiters her inner self and thus celebrates the veneration of womanhood. Yajnaseni takes a different route, contrary to 'Sita stereotype' keeping her goal in mind. She realizes that if woman wants to protect herself from the humiliating atrocities, she need not take shelter in the lap of Mother earth rather she has to fight for herself using her inner strength and power. She believes that every woman possesses *shakti swaroopa* and the need is to embrace it.

Any woman irrespective of age, caste, religion, country is worthy of a man's respect, for a woman is formed of Shakti and without worshipping that Shakti Swaroop, none can become a hero. (345)
In conclusion we can assert that Ray’s Yajnaseni depicts a courageous attitude towards all problems that take place in her life and protests against injustice. She acts as a torch bearer for the contemporary women but in spite of many changes that have made Indian women rise up and raise a voice of protest against injustice meted out to them, it is still a far cry that they can like Yajnaseni be instrumental in punishing the guilty. It is only by voicing their protest they think of having done the best they are capable of. It is the Sita archetype that is followed by almost all Indian women and it gives them strength to bear injustice. A new awakening has given them courage to raise a voice of protest but still to reach anywhere near Draupadi, they have miles to go.

The woman in search of identity vacillates between Sita archetype and the Draupadi archetype. In spite of being respectful towards the conservative and traditional roles assigned to her by the long standing mores, she has the courage to question the values that she finds suffocating her very being. The role model of Sita was acceptable in Indian society at one point of time for it represents the cardinal virtues of forbearance and self sacrifice and this role model does not carry currency now. Ray’s Yajnaseni by liberating herself from the Sita role model that she was happily emulating till the Sabha Parva proves the unsuitability of this self sacrificing role model. Yajnaseni exhibits the courage to fight the system to purgate it of the ills, so that no other Draupadi is humiliated in future. She rises to avenge her insult and does not sit quiet till is avenged.

Works Cited:


