



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

ISSN 2455-7544

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access e Journal

Vol.1 No 4, December, 2016

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

<http://daathvoyagejournal.com>

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

Department of English

Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.



Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* as a Study in Feminist Revisionist Re-writing

Dr. Panchali Mukherjee

Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Languages
T. John College , Bangalore 560066
Email: panchali.mukherjee@gmail.com

Abstract: The research paper “Pratibha Ray’s *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* as a Study in Feminist Revisionist Re-writing” will explore the idea of ‘Feminist Revisionist Re-writing’ or ‘Feminist Revisionist Mythology’ in the light of the translated version of Pratibha Ray’s *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (1995) by Pradip Bhattacharya. It studies the role of Yajnaseni or Draupadi as presented in the text from a feminist perspective thereby countering the male biases that have coloured her presentation in the epic or in mythology since time immemorial. It will attempt to show the way in which the above mentioned text asks new questions in relation to Yajnaseni. It will describe the way in which this text rediscovers the character of Yajnaseni, resists sexism in literature and increases awareness regarding the sexual politics prevalent in the society. The research paper shows the way in which the text dismantles the literary convention to reveal the social ones and invert both by making the ‘Other’ into the primary subject. The paper also attempts to show the way in which ‘Revisionist Mythmaking’ is a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery and is a means of exploring and attempting to transform the self and the culture.

Keywords: Feminist Revisionist Re-writing/Feminist Revisionist Mythology, Feminism, Revisionist Mythmaking.

‘Feminist Revisionist Re-writing/Feminist Revisionist Mythology’ is a type of feminist literature which refers to the retelling of myths from the point of view of the main female character recreating the story in a way that attempts to subvert the treatment of



women as inactive objects in literature and also in society at large (*Literary Vistas Vol. 4* 143). The feminist narrator in the 'Feminist Revisionist Re-writing' also pokes fun at the flawed view of women in the original text. In Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*, the anecdote of *Mahabharata* is narrated through the perspective of Draupadi, the Queen of the Pandavas, whereas originally the story of *Mahabharata* has been narrated by Ved Vyasa, a man. It gives her agency as the narrator of the story because in the story, Draupadi justifies her decision of marrying five husbands as it helps her to maintain harmony and unity among the brothers (*Yajnaseni* 54-64). She portrays herself as the common thread that will bind all the brothers together thereby rehabilitating her image of a fallen woman having many men. Moreover, her polyandry may also be seen as a subversion of the patriarchal norms of a patriarchal society although she is initially very uncomfortable with the idea but later gives her consent thinking of the greater good. Lord Krishna indulges in polygamy and has many wives but aspersions are not cast on his character as he is a man and moreover, a god. The mythical Draupadi of *Mahabharata* does not get the agency to rehabilitate her image in the original epic as the text is narrated by a man so it is done by Pratibha Ray in this text.

“‘Feminist criticism’, then, is a specific kind of political discourse: a crucial and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature” (Moi 204). The novel is informed by feminist criticism as it exposes the ingrained biases and prejudices of a patriarchal and sexist society as manifested by the Pandavs when they bring home Draupadi after her marriage to Arjun. Yudhishtir announces her arrival in the following way to their mother Kunti:

The elder brother called out exultantly, “Mother, today we have brought a priceless thing. Open the door and see! Your sons have not returned empty-handed.” (*Yajnaseni* 55)

It shows the objectification of women as Draupadi in the above instance is perceived as a priceless object and is dehumanized. Similarly, during the game of dice she is staked and lost



by Yudhishtir to Shakuni, the maternal uncle of Duryodhan, representing the Kaurav side in the game as a commodity that belongs to Yudhishtir thereby dehumanizing her. She protests against Yudhishtir's decision to put her on stake when he himself had become a slave after losing himself in the game of dice. When she is dragged to the assembly hall of the Kaurav court by Duhshasan and an attempt is made to de-robe her in front of the whole Kuru clan including the elders of this clan Draupadi emerges victorious in this struggle against patriarchy and sexism. The act of de-robing her is a strategy used by Kauravs to dishonour her so she nips this attempt through the strength of her mind and by surrendering herself to god, that is, Lord Krishna who provides her with unending flow of cloth which nullifies the attempt to de-robe her and she is able to save her honour. Thus, Draupadi becomes a feminist figure because she is able to subvert the objectification and commodification of women in society when she insists on the human value that she has as an individual in keeping the brothers united and not a mere pleasure object that is meant to be shared among men. On the other hand, her 'stri shakti' or power as a woman is manifested when she comes out unscathed from the de-robing episode on the basis of the strength of her soul and her mind and with the help of divine aid thereby subverting commodification of women in the society and foregrounding her identity as a human not as a commodity.

Among many feminists it has long been established usage to make 'feminine' (and 'masculine') represent *social constructs* (patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms), and to reserve 'female' and 'male' for the purely biological aspects of sexual difference. Thus 'feminine' represents nurture, and 'female' nature in this usage. 'Femininity' is a cultural construct: one isn't born a woman, one becomes one as Simone de Beauvoir puts it. (Moi 209)

In the novel, Draupadi is shown to be biologically a female as we are told about her vulnerability when she is menstruating and is clad in a single garment but is dragged to the assembly hall of the Kauravs although she is expected to live in seclusion in the inner



quarters of the palace. She is not feminine as she does not conform to the social constructs, that is, patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms. An instance of her non-conformity can be seen in her refusal to go to the assembly hall when Pratikami comes and tells her coldly “King Duryodhan’s command is: queen Yajnaseni should appear in the assembly-hall” (*Yajnaseni* 234). She questions Pratikami about the appropriateness of King Duryodhan’s command as her husband Yudhishtir is still the emperor but she is told by the messenger that he has staked his Queen Krishnaa after staking and losing his immovable assets, movable assets, male slaves, female slaves, brothers and himself so she is now the slave of Kauravs. She still remains unfazed and tells Pratikami brazenly to go and ask Yudhishtir whether he first staked and lost himself or her and she wouldn’t go till she got an answer from him. Thus, she is shown to be a female who is not feminine as she does not conform to the dictates of King Duryodhan or her husband Yudhishtir thereby flouting the feminine model code of conduct that is prescribed by patriarchy to keep women in shackles. She is a rebellious figure who refuses to accept the wishes of the vengeful king or effeminate husband thereby asserting her identity as a feminist. Moreover, during the de-robing scene she does not depend on any of her husbands to rescue her from her predicament as they have lost their freedom as a result of the game of dice and are the slaves of Kauravs instead she acts for herself by using her ‘stri shakti’ which too foregrounds her feminist identity.

The French feminist Hélène Cixous in “Where is she?” talks of death dealing binary opposition such as Activity/Passivity, Culture/Nature, Head/Emotions or Intelligible/Sensitive etcetera. These binary oppositions are imbricated in the patriarchal value system and each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the ‘feminine side’ is seen as the negative, powerless instance (paraphrased from *Moi* 210). In the novel, Draupadi is seen to be active rather than passive thereby subverting the patriarchal binary opposition as during the stripping scene she vows to herself “Till I wet my hair with the blood of Duhshasan’s breast, I will leave it unbound thus” (*Yajnaseni* 244). Her vow exhibits her



agency as she desires retribution and also her determination to punish the wrongdoers. She exhibits intelligence when she questions the rules of the game of dice that has spelled doom on the Pandavs as a king is expected to play another king but Shakuni plays with Yudhishtir on behalf of Duryodhan which displays manipulation in the game thereby subverting the patriarchal binary opposition of head/emotions.

Julia Kristeva, French-Bulgarian linguist and psychoanalyst, has shown femininity as marginality in terms of positionality (Moi 212-213). In the novel, Yajnaseni subverts the centre-periphery power politics and establishes her identity at the centre rather than at the margins by making use of Dhritarashtra's boon to broker the freedom of Yudhishtir (*Yajnaseni* 244) thereby aiding her husband to get freedom rather than her husband aiding her in the hour of need. As a result she relegates her husband to the margin and occupies the central position.

'Gynocriticism' refers to women's writing that helps to propagate the feminist concerns of the writer through her literary work. Pratibha Ray is one such woman writer who tries to rehabilitate the image of Draupadi as she is a much misunderstood and vilified character from the epic of *Mahabharata* who has been blamed to cause the war of Kurukshetra thereby providing a balanced portrayal of her character by showing the humane aspect of her character as when she is dying she utters "*Om shantih, shantih, shantih!*" (*Yajnaseni* 398) and justifying her motive in causing the war by showing it to be a corrective measure to right the wrong that was done on her. The other aim of the author is to convey the discourse associated with the emancipation of women to the women of today through the example of Draupadi.

The novel is an example of 'Feminist Revisionist Re-writing' as the literary work presents Yajnaseni, one who has emerged from the sacrificial fire, as a character who lives her life on her own terms subverting the patriarchal norms in a patriarchal society, showing agency and establishing her identity as that of an emancipated woman. Her character is



projected by Pratibha Ray as a prototype of modern women who too need to break free from the shackles of the patriarchal society. Her life's story is narrated by her and not by any man. She is presented neither as a goddess nor as a demoniac woman but as a human being thereby undercutting the gender stereotypes created by patriarchy and imposed on women. The author selectively presents the incidents from Draupadi's life to give her character a feminist shade and portrays her as an example for the whole womankind.

Works Cited

Cixous, Hélène and Clément, Catherine. *La Jeune Née*. Paris.

Moi, Toril. "Feminist Literary Criticism." *Modern Literary Theory*. Ed. Ann Jefferson and David Robey. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1986. 204-233.

Panikkar, Dr. Chitra. *Literary Vistas Vol. IV*. Bangalore: Prasaraanga Bangalore University, 2014. 143-144.

Ray, Pratibha. *Yajnaseni*. Trans. Pradip Bhattacharya. New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 1995.